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GUN TROUBLE
An Action Novelet
By LEROY BOYD

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

The
GHOST OF SPOOK McGEE
A Tombstone & Speedy Novelet By W. C. TUTTLE

SIXGUN SIGNATURE
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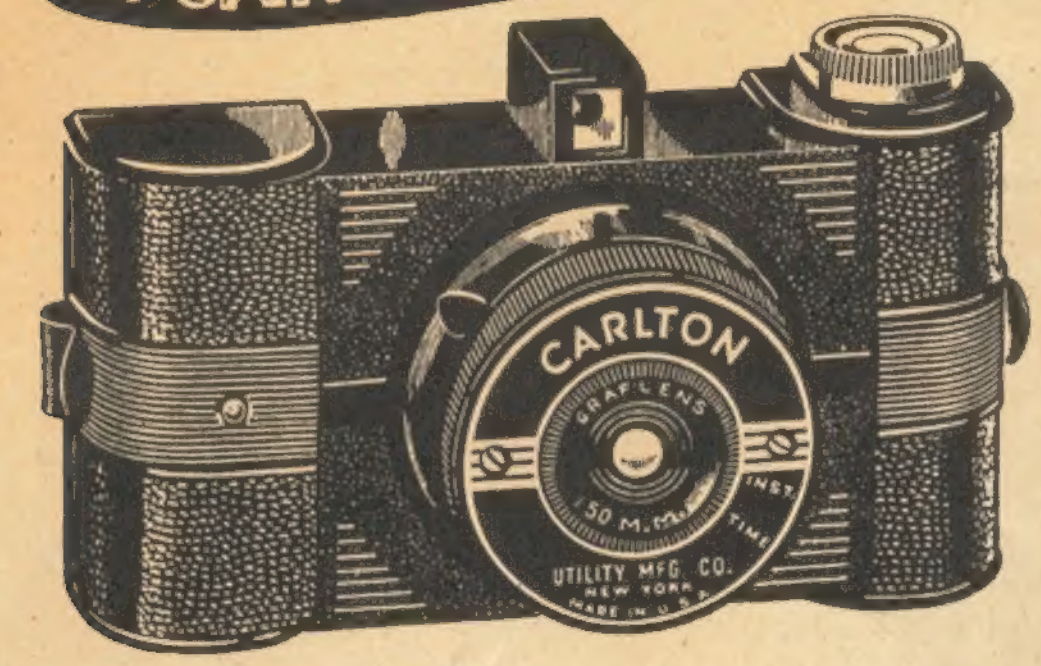

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Please send me a genuine Carlton Candid Camera and Free Carrying Case—all for only $3.98 cash.

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☐ Send C.O.D.—I will pay Postman $3.98 plus postage. ☐ Enclosed find $3.98 in full payment postpaid.

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Nationally Famous Tableware To Treasure SORORITY SILVER PLATE

TRIPLE PLATED with PURE SILVER
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Exquisite 24-PIECE Service For Six

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☐ Please rush me the "All-around" Zipper Pass Case Billfold with Built-In Change Purse and hand engraved Identification Key Tag. On arrival I will pay postman only $2.98 plus 20% Federal Tax and few cents postage and C.O.D. Charges. It is understood that if I am not positively thrilled and delighted in every way I can return the billfold within 10 days for full refund.

MY FULL NAME_____
(PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY)

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CITY_____ STATE_____

☐ To save shipping charges I am enclosing in advance $2.98 plus 20% Federal Excise tax (total $3.58). Please ship my Zipper Billfold order all postage charges prepaid.

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EXCITING WESTERN

VOL. 10, No. 1 | EVERY STORY BRAND NEW | AUGUST, 1945

A Complete Tombstone and Speedy Novelet

THE GHOST OF SPOOK McGEE

By W. C. TUTTLE

When a Pair of Rollicking Range Sleuths Hit the Town of Antelope Wells to Clear up a Rustler Mystery, They Tangle with the Supernatural—but Face Some Mighty Real Bullets! 11

A Complete Action Novelet

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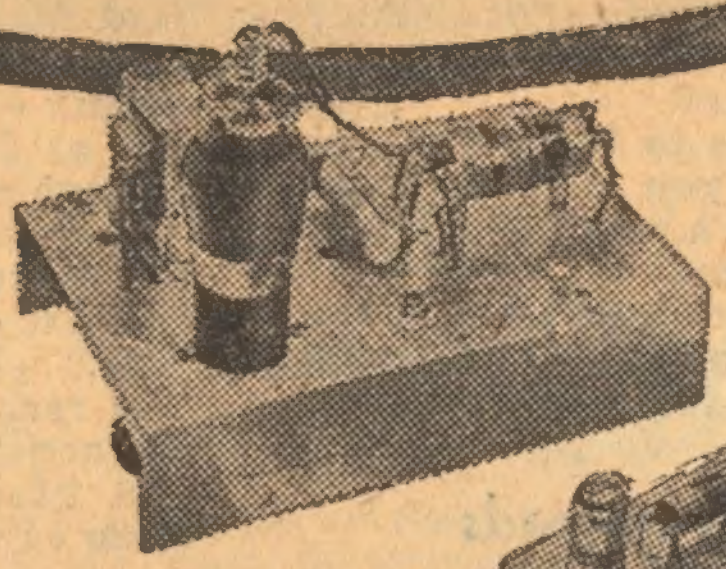

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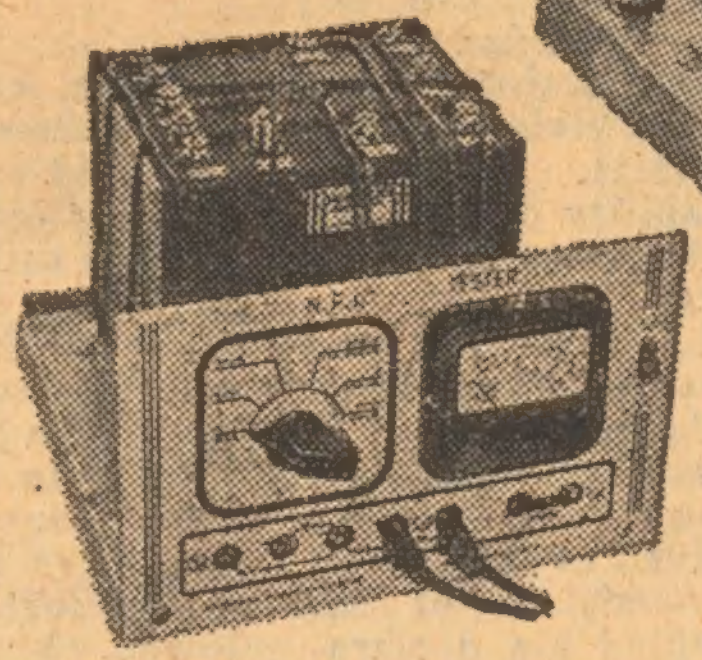

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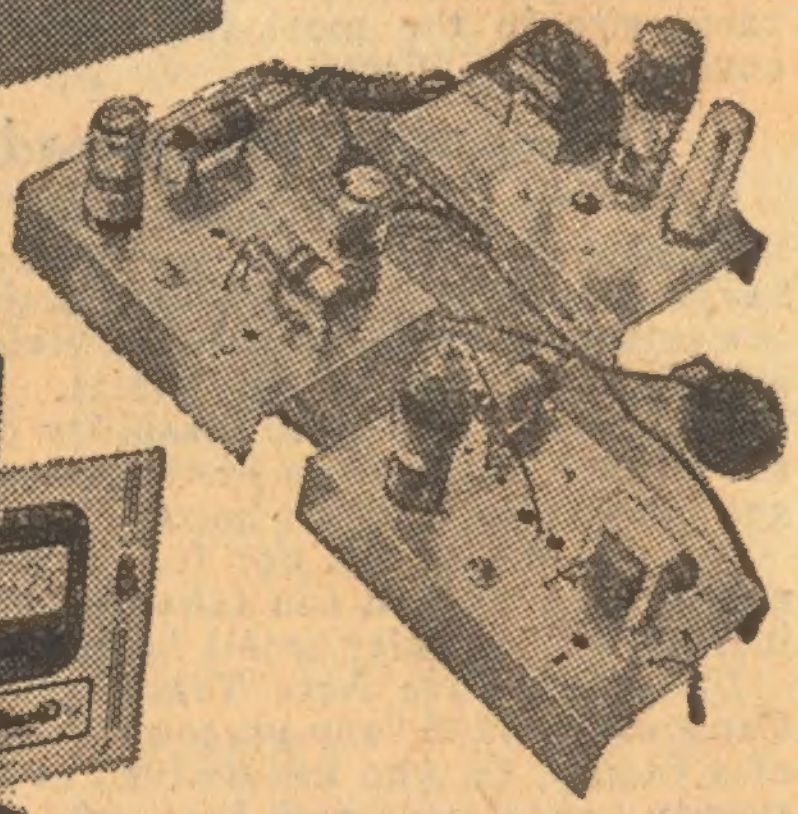

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A Department for Readers Conducted by CAPTAIN RANGER

ANY of you Western-minded hombres and hombresses like to have five postwar acres in the heart of the Southwest desert country? You can use them for recreation, vacation trips, or just a spot to relax in, and bask in the healthful solitude of the desert sun.

With a million other things on his busy mind, Uncle Sam, keenly aware of the lure of the desert and the health-giving properties of its dry, sun-warmed air, has fixed it so American citizens can have their own private piece of desert land!

All that is necessary is to fulfill a few simple conditions. Then you pay a nominal rental, about five dollars a year for a five acre tract, and the land is yours.

You can build a desert home on it, a vacation cabin, or hold it as your own private camp site in the most fascinating outdoors country in the West.

Jackrabbit Homesteads

These "Jackrabbit Homesteads" are not agricultural. They are not intended to be revenue producing, or self-supporting. They are primarily vacation spots, or living sites in selected sections of the desert. Returning service men, many with disability discharges, are already making use of this opportunity to get themselves a desert home.

Yet the project is not for ex-service men alone. Any citizen can take up one of these increasingly popular small homesteads.

Under the Five Acre Tract law passed by Congress in 1938 "any person who is the head of a family, or who has arrived at the age of twenty-one years, and is a citizen of the United States, or who has filed his declaration to become such a citizen as required by the naturalization laws" can get himself a pint-size homestead in the Western desert country. The act does not apply to Alaska, nor to land in such reservations as national forests, national parks, or national monuments. It does apply to land in such areas as Taylor grazing districts.

The five acre tracts are primarily sections of unoccupied public lands that have been classified as chiefly valuable for home, cabin, camp, health, convalescent, recreational, or in some instances "business sites."

The Government, for purposes of classification and administration, has defined these different types of sites as follows:

A home site is one suitable for a permanent, year-round residence for a single person or family.

A cabin site is a site suitable for a summer, week-end, or vacation residence.

A camp site is one suitable for temporary camping and the erection of simple or temporary structures and shelters, such as tents, tent platforms, etc.

A health site is a site suitable for a temporary or permanent residence of a single person or family for the prevention or cure of disease or illness.

A convalescent site is a site suitable for the residence of a single person or family for the purpose of recuperation from a disease or illness.

A recreational site is a site chiefly suitable for non-commercial outdoor recreation.

A business site is one suitable for some form of commercial enterprise.

Fair Enough!

Since, except in the case of land allotted for business, the miniature homesteads are not intended to be devoted to producing a living, the applicant *must* when he files his papers furnish satisfactory evidence of resources sufficient to insure financial responsibility adequate to maintain himself and family, if any, and to successfully carry out the undertaking for which he proposes to use the land.

That is fair enough, and a common sense provision of the law. There are a few other necessary conditions as well.

For instance, applications will not be allowed which would lead to private ownership or control of scenic attractions or water resources that should be kept open to the public. And, at present at least, Uncle Sam's administrative procedure regarding the five acre tracts favors allowing the land to be used through term leases rather than outright sale.

Full protection is accorded the lessee, and sales *may* be authorized on individual application or by Government motion.

To give a single example of one section where applications for these five acre slices of Western sunshine have been filed, there is

(Continued on page 8)

THOUSANDS NOW PLAY

who never thought they could!

Learned Quickly at Home

I didn't dream I could actually learn to play without a teacher. Now when I play for people they hardly believe that I learned to play so well in so short a time.
*H. C. S., Calif.

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I have completed your course and your lessons have been most satisfactory. I can play all of the popular songs. I have also earned money playing at dances.
*E. N. J., New York.

Wouldn't Take $1000 for Course

The lessons are so simple that anyone can understand them. I have learned to play by note in a little more than a month. I wouldn't take a thousand dollars for my course.
*S. E. A., Kansas City, Mo.

Finding New Joy

I am finding a new joy that I never experienced before, for I have always wanted to play, but had given up hope until I heard of your course.
*C. S. Lucien, Okla.

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I am glad to tell anyone about the U. S. School. It is just what they say it is and they will do what they say they will. If you want to learn music you can't beat it!
*W. E. D., N. Mex.

*Actual pupils names on request. Pictures by professional models.

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YOU think it's difficult to learn music? That's what thousands of others have thought! Just like you, they long to play some instrument—the piano, violin, guitar, saxophone or other favorites. But they denied themselves the pleasure—because they thought it took months and years of tedious study to learn.

Learn in Spare Time at Home

And then they made an amazing discovery! They learned about a wonderful way to learn music at home—without a private teacher—without tedious study—and in a surprisingly short time. They wrote to the U. S. School of Music for the facts about this remarkable short-cut method. And the facts opened their eyes! They were amazed to find how easy it was to learn.

The result? Over 750-000 men and women have studied music at home this simple, A-B-C way. Now, all over the world, enthusiastic music-lovers are enjoying the thrilling satisfaction of creating their own music. They have found the key to good time, poularity and profit.

Costs Less Than 7c a Day

And that's what **you** can do, right now. Get the proof that you, too, can learn to play your favorite instrument—quickly, easily, in spare time at home for less than seven cents a day. Never mind if you have no musical knowledge, training or talent. Just read the fascinating booklet and Print and Picture sample that fully explains all about the famous U. S. School method. If interested tear out the coupon now, before you turn the page. U. S. School of Music, 2948 Brunswick Bldg. New York 10, N. Y. Largest school of its kind in the world. (47th year)

FREE!
Print and Picture Sample

NOTICE
Please don't confuse the U. S. School of Music method with any system of teaching music "by ear" or by trick charts. Our method teaches you to play by actual notes—not by any trick or number system.

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I am interested in music study, particularly in the instrument checked below. Please send me your free illustrated booklet "How to Learn Music at Home," and your free Print and Picture Sample.

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Hawaiian Guitar	Trumpet, Cornet	Flute	Mandolin
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City.....State.....

NOTE: If you are under 16 years of age, parent must sign coupon.

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TRAIL BLAZERS

(Continued from page 6)

picturesque Yucca valley in southern California. Many entries have been applied for also close to swanky Palm Springs, or out at Twenty-Nine Palms in the desert back of Hollywood.

Plenty of Room

How big is a five acre tract? Roughly it is a piece of ground 330 by 660 feet. That's plenty of room. And you have the rest of the desert to roam around in.

The first thing that anyone desiring to apply for a Jackrabbit homestead should do is visit or write the U. S. Land Office for the district in which his proposed five acres is located. Information regarding areas that have been classified as coming within the provisions of the Five Acre Tract law can be obtained in this manner.

Next step is to go and locate the land, personally picking the spot for which you want to make an entry application. That done and the location of the land by section, township and range obtained, further verification as to whether or not it is open to entry can be checked at the Land Office having jurisdiction over the area.

A master file of township plats is maintained at the district Land Office and is available for inspection. After the location of the desired tract is verified as "open," you can go ahead and file for it on regular forms provided by the Land Office.

A Nominal Fee

A fee of $5. must accompany your application which will be returned should the application be rejected. However, once an application is filed, the particular tract is closed to further entries pending checking and inspection by Government field men. This is to avoid duplication of claims for the same tract.

It may take about two months from date of filing before final approval is obtained. Possibly a little longer. But Jackrabbit homesteaders should remember the mere filing of the papers and presentation of the $5 filing fee does *not* give the right to occupy or settle on the land applied for.

On the other hand once the application comes back approved, you are ready to go

(Continued on page 78)

ENTERTAINMENT FOR EVERYBODY

IN

BEST CROSSWORD PUZZLES

THE BIG QUARTER'S WORTH AT ALL NEWSSTANDS!

LET'S GET THE ADMIRAL HIS HORSE!

Official U. S. Navy Photo

Admiral Halsey has his eye on a fine white horse called Shirayuki.

Some time ago, at a press conference, he expressed the hope that one day soon he could ride it.

The chap *now* in Shirayuki's saddle is Japan's Emperor—Hirohito.

He is the ruler of as arrogant, treacherous, and vicious a bunch of would-be despots as this earth has ever seen.

The kind of arrogance shown by Tojo—who was going to dictate peace from the White House . . . remember?

Well, it's high time we finished this whole business. High time we got the Emperor off his high horse, and gave Admiral Halsey his ride.

The best way for us at home to have a hand in this clean-up is to support the 7th War Loan.

It's the biggest loan yet. It's two loans in one. Last year, by this time, you had been asked twice to buy extra bonds.

Your personal quota is big—bigger than ever before. So big you may feel you can't afford it.

But we *can* afford it—if American sons, brothers, husbands can cheerfully afford to die.

ALL OUT FOR THE MIGHTY 7th WAR LOAN

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THE PUBLISHERS OF THIS MAGAZINE

This is an official U.S. Treasury advertisement—prepared under auspices of Treasury Department and War Advertising Council

THOUGHTS HAVE WINGS

You Can Influence Others With Your Thinking!

TRY IT SOME TIME. Concentrate intently upon another person seated in a room with you, without his noticing it. Observe him gradually become restless and finally turn and look in your direction. Simple—yet it is a *positive demonstration* that thought generates a mental energy which can be projected from your mind to the consciousness of another. Do you realize how much of your success and happiness in life depend upon your influencing others? Is it not important to you to have others understand your point of view—to be receptive to your proposals?

Demonstrable Facts

How many times have you wished there were some way you could impress another favorably—*get across to him or her your ideas?* That thoughts can be transmitted, received, and understood by others is now scientifically demonstrable. The tales of miraculous accomplishments of mind by the ancients are now known to be fact—not fable. The method whereby these things can be *intentionally*, not accidentally, accomplished has been a secret long cherished by the Rosicrucians—one of the schools of ancient wisdom existing throughout the world. To thousands everywhere, for centuries, the Rosicrucians have privately taught this nearly-lost art of the practical use of mind power.

This *Free* Book Points Out the Way

The Rosicrucians (not a religious organization) invite you to explore the powers of your mind. Their sensible, simple suggestions have caused intelligent men and women to soar to new heights of accomplishment. *They will show* you how to use your natural forces and talents to do things you now think are beyond your ability. *Use the coupon below* and send for a copy of the fascinating sealed *free* book, "The Mastery of Life," which explains how you may receive this unique wisdom and benefit by its application to your daily affairs.

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Scribe M. R. A., The Rosicrucians, AMORC,
Rosicrucian Park, San Jose, California

Kindly send me a free copy of the book, "The Mastery of Life." I am interested in learning how I may receive instructions about the full use of my natural powers.

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"Was you expectin' somebody," Tombstone drawled

THE GHOST OF SPOOK McGEE

By W. C. TUTTLE

When a Pair of Rollicking Range Sleuths Hit the Town of Antelope Wells to Clear Up a Rustler Mystery, They Tangle With the Supernatural—but Face Some Mighty Real Bullets!

CHAPTER I

Killing At Antelope Wells

Old Luke Brown was a sweet old soul
With a heart of gold so fi-i-i-ine,
But the weight of the thing
Just ruined him now,
So he went and stole his neighbor's cow,
And they hung him to a cottonwood bough
In the days of Forty-Nine.

JIM KEATON, secretary of the Cattlemen's Association, leaned back in his office chair and gravely considered the singer, "Tombstone" Jones, six feet, four inches of slat-like manhood, sprawled over a chair. "Speedy" Smith said that if Tombstone could find a pair of flexible shotgun barrels, he could wear them for chaps. Tombstone had a long, lean face, very sad eyes and a wide, gash-like mouth. One long lock of hair hung down his forehead, almost exactly in line with his long nose.

Seated in another chair was Speedy Smith, Tombstone's partner. Speedy was constructed on the same general specifications as Tombstone, but he was only five feet, seven inches tall. Speedy, fully-clad, armed, and if carrying some extra cartridges for his forty-five, might have weighed one hundred and ten pounds. Speedy was bow-legged, and had tried to grow a mustache, but with little success. The left side of his upper lip wasn't fertile.

Tombstone didn't have a particularly good voice, but he sang with a certain amount of sadness, as though Old Luke Brown had been a close relative, or at least a valued friend.

"What am I supposed to do—cry?" asked Jim Keaton soberly.

"It just goes to show," replied Tombstone.

"Goes to show what?"

"Oh, that yuh can get so big-hearted that it'll bog yuh down, Jim."

"I see," mused the secretary. "Meaning

A TOMBSTONE AND SPEEDY NOVELET

that I'm big-hearted, eh?"

"No," said Speedy quickly. "You ain't. In fact, me and Tombstone has done decided that you ain't got no heart a-tall, Jim. You've just got a mainspring, like a watch. Here we are, yore two best and most reliable detectives—and yuh ain't got nothin' for us to do."

"Wait a minute, Jim," begged Tombstone. "Don't speak yet. We've done cleaned up two-three tough cases for yuh. You'll have to admit that we done it. We're either dumb, lucky or smart."

"You ain't smart," said Jim Keaton.

"That leaves us two to go on," said Speedy unperturbed.

"And you are not detectives," added Keaton soberly.

"We ain't been so awful lucky, either," said Tombstone thoughtfully.

"Which brings us right down to a basic fact," said Keaton dryly.

Tombstone grinned. "I think yuh're stringin' me—as the feller said when the bronc threw him across the barb-wire fence."

"Which proves my point," said Keaton. "Neither of you know any more about detectin' than a pig knows about Easter. I'll admit you've blundered into the answer to several cases. I'm very grateful to you. You've done better than I ever expected. But, as a matter of fact, I've got to cut expenses, so if you two will take my advice, you'll forget you ever did any range detectin' and go back to punchin' cows."

TOMBSTONE looked at Speedy, who was trying to tug at his mustache, his eyes thoughtful.

"That's gratitude for yuh," Speedy said. "Give him the best years of our lives, and we're cast aside like a old boot. Sweat and slave for him. Jim, I take it all back—you ain't got no mainspring—you've just got a couple of weights, like one of them there cuckoo-clocks."

Tombstone Jones got to his feet, towering almost to the ceiling in his high-heel boots and tall sombrero.

"Jim Keaton, you'll live to regret this here deed yo're doin'!" he said solemnly. "Yuh're castin' us aside, like a bride at the altar, sendin' us out into a cold world, with nothin' under us but a horse, malice in our hearts, and—and danged little money. We done saved the world from a wave of crime, and—shucks."

"Mebbe forcin' us into a life of criminology," added Speedy.

"You're always broke," reminded Keaton. "A hundred dollars only lasts you to the nearest poker game or roulette wheel."

"The next thing you'll be sayin' that we're not honest," sighed Tombstone.

"What's your opinion?" asked Keaton.

"Well, there ain't no use goin' into that," replied Tombstone, who was the most prolific liar in the State, even if his lies didn't hurt anybody.

"Why argue about it?" asked Keaton. "I've told yuh that I can't use yuh any longer. I've got to cut down expenses, and as long as I've got plenty reliable men—"

A man came into the office, bearing a telegram, tossed it on the desk and went out. Keaton picked it up and tore off the envelope. Spreading the sheet of yellow paper on the desk-top, he read it quickly. Something between an oath and a prayer passed his taut lips. He didn't look at Tombstone and Speedy—he looked past them, his eyes agate-hard.

"Bad news?" asked Speedy quietly. Keaton nodded and shifted his eyes back to the telegram. After a moment or two, he read it aloud.

"'Man killed here yesterday. Papers show he is Bob Welch, working for you. Looks like murder. Please advise what to do with the body. Sims, sheriff.'"

"Where'd it happen?" asked Tombstone.

"Antelope Wells, down in Bitter River Valley."

"For heaven's sake!" exclaimed Tombstone. "So they elected Sims!"

"Do you know him?" asked Keaton.

"Do I know Sims?" Tombstone looked his amazement. "Him and me are just like brothers. My uncle started that town. They named the valley after him, too. He was knowed as Bitter River Jones. Come in there alone and drove the Apaches out, single-handed. Well, well! Old Sims is the sheriff! Yuh know, it's a small world, Jim."

"I've got to send that wire," muttered Keaton. "Hang it, Bob was one of my best men! Been with me four years, too. That's terrible. Murdered!"

"Yuh're short-handed now," reminded Tombstone gently. "Not only that, but I'll bet you'd kind of like to know who killed him."

"Yeah," replied Keaton grimly. "Yeah, that's right. I'll talk—with you later. Now, I've got to get busy."

Tombstone walked to the doorway and stood there, looking out on the street, while Keaton searched his desk for certain papers. After a while Tombstone spoke.

"Here comes that same feller with another telegram."

He stood aside for the man to enter.

"This came while I was over here," the man said. "It's the same thing that was on the wire this mornin', but I forgot to tell yuh."

Keaton read the wire to himself, first.

"'Two men stuck up the train near Crescent City last night and stole sixty thousand dollars,'" he read aloud. "'No descriptions. Sims, sheriff.'"

"What have I got to do with train robberies?" rasped Keaton. "Sims! He must

As the bullet crashed, Tombstone's sombrero went sailing.

like to send telegrams!"

"He always was that way," said Tombstone quietly. "Impulsive, even as a lad. I 'member one time—"

"Get out of here—and don't come back for an hour!" roared Keaton. "I can't even think with you two around."

They went outside very quickly and stood on the edge of the sidewalk.

"I reckon we better go up to the hotel," said Tombstone. "They've got a good map up there on the wall."

"What do yuh want a map for?" asked Speedy curiously.

"I'd kind of like to find out where Bitter River Valley is, before we go back there," replied Tombstone. "Come on."

CHAPTER II

Gun-Fighting Old-Timer

IT HAD been raining for three days and nights in Bitter River Valley. Every usually-dry water-course was a raging river, and even the main street of Antelope Wells was flooded. Horses stood fetlock deep in water at the hitch-racks, and cowboys' boots squashed as they walked on the wooden sidewalks.

"Sunshine" Sims, the new sheriff, sat at his desk in the office, gloomily considering the weather—and Hap Haggarty, his deputy, who was trying to put a new string on his guitar. Sunshine was only twenty-seven years of age, well-built, of medium height, and with good-looking, bronzed features. Haggarty was short and rotund, partly bald and bow-legged. His features were undeniably Celtic, with many grin-wrinkles. Haggarty was forty.

"Buck" Short had been sheriff so long that no one ever considered that anyone would have a chance to defeat him in an election. Buck was only forty, saturnine, cold-jawed, and with a gun-slinging reputation. Sunshine Sims, egged into the contest by a few friends, was probably more surprised than Buck Short was, when he beat Buck by thirty votes. His first official act was to appoint Hap Haggarty as his deputy. Hap was his bunkie. Neither of them knew anything about running the office.

A thin trickle of water came through the ceiling and splattered on the knee of Hap Haggarty, who jerked his precious guitar out of the way, and slid further down the bench. Then he sang softly, in a reedy tenor.

Oh, he drove the animiles in, two by two,
He drove the animiles in, two by two,
O-o-o-oh, he drove the animiles in, two by two-o-o-o,
The elephant and the kang-g-g-g-aroo-o-o-o.

"If this danged rain would only let up—we could do somethin'," said Sunshine.

"What, for instance?" asked Hap.

"Well, I dunno, Hap. We've got to do somethin' about that robbery."

"Telegraph our sympathy to the express company," suggested Hap.

A man came in, water dripping from his clothes, making a wide puddle on the wooden floor. He was from the stage depot, and brought a telegram, which just came in on the stage. It was from Jim Keaton:

HAVE CORONER SHIP BODY BOB WELCH TO TUCSON CARE WEBER UNDERTAKING.

"I'll go see Doc Harper," said Sunshine. "If any outlaws try to break into the jail while I'm gone, Hap—shoot three times."

"All right." Hap nodded soberly. "Probably won't be more'n three at a time, anyway. Why do yuh reckon it took that Keaton feller so long to answer?"

Sunshine looked at the telegram again, snorted and tossed it aside.

"It was sent three days ago!" he exclaimed. "That dad-burned stage driver has been packin' it around in his pocket."

"Mebbe it got bogged down on the wet wires," suggested Hap, his face screwed up, as he tightened a string.

Tu-u-u-ung!

"The last E-string in Bitter River Valley!" he wailed.

"Too bad—thank goodness," said Sunshine. "Be seein' yuh."

Hap put the guitar away and went to the doorway of the office, where he looked gloomily at the drifting rain. On the north side of Antelope Wells was an old water-course, gouged deep in places, and this was running bank full, threatening at any time to inundate the town.

Two cowboys came riding down the street, hats pulled low, slicker-collars high, heading for the stable and feed-corral. Hap didn't recognize them in the bad light, although it was only mid-afternoon. They were Tombstone Jones and Speedy Smith, coming to Antelope Wells, grudgingly allowed the assignment to find the killer of Bob Welch. Jim Keaton had little faith in their ability, but had no one else to send.

They stabled their horses, ordered the stable-man to "rub 'em down," which they knew blamed well he wouldn't do, and went in search of food. They had to pass the sheriff's office, and Hap Haggarty nodded to them. That, in itself, was an invitation to stop. They craved a dry spot.

"Yuh shore have a heavy dew here, Sheriff," said Speedy, searching his pockets for

some dry tobacco.

"This is just humidity," replied Hap. "Spread yore slickers, gents."

"Do yuh know a good place to eat?" queried Tombstone.

"Yeah." Hap nodded soberly. "There's a good place in Phoenix and one in Tucson."

"Much obliged. But ain't there a closer place than that?"

"They allege to serve meals at the Antelope Hotel, but yuh can't nourish before six o'clock. Louie-Go-Boom's place, up the street, is all right, if yuh take sody before and after. Much dampness underfoot between here and Crescent City?"

"I heard my horse walkin' in the mud," said Speedy.

TOMBSTONE coughed gently and shifted his sombrero.

"Yuh know, we seen the funniest sight a while ago," he said. "A flock of wild ducks was a-tryin' to light on a big pond, but they can't get down, on account of too much water in the air. Well, sir, they just finally folded their wings and started swimmin', about twenty feet off the ground. It was somethin' I ain't never seen before.

"The nearest I ever come to seein' a thing like that was over in the Wind River country. Me and Old Testament Todd, him bein' a preacher of sorts, went out to catch some catfish in a little lake. Well, sir, up comes a storm like this, only worse, and the catfish all swam out of the lake. Yessir, we was awful put-out about it, 'cause we both hankered for catfish stew, until Old Testament got a bright idea. We made a couple of kites, tied the hooks onto 'em and got the blamdest fishin' yuh ever seen. It shore seemed funny to hook a catfish up there a couple hundred feet and—pull him down!"

"I never call a man a liar, until I'm sure," declared Hap soberly. "I'll buy a drink, gents. My name's Hap Haggarty, and I'm only a deputy."

"Pleased to meet yuh, Mr. Haggarty," said Speedy. "I'm Speedy Smith and this here authentic specimen is Tombstone Jones. We accept yore kind offer."

They splashed over to the Broadway Saloon and braced against the bar. A five-handed poker game was in progress, and two bedraggled-looking cowboys were playing a game of pool. Three other slicker-clad cowpunchers were at the bar, having a drink.

"Don't jerk around, but that hard-eyed hombre in the poker game, the one with the silver-band on his hat, is Buck Short," said Hap. "He's been the sheriff here for six years, but me and Sunshine Sims beat him out last election—dang the luck."

"You don't like the work?" asked Speedy.

"Too quiet," replied Hap. "I crave action. I'll be usin' hair-oil and white collars, next thing I know. Mebbe a little perfume."

"Yuh had a murder here the other day, didn't yuh?" asked Speedy.

"Yea-a-ah. A cow detective."

"You speak like it didn't matter," remarked Tombstone.

Hap shrugged his shoulders. "A cow detective don't live long."

"Yesterday, a aig, tomorrow a good-luck wish-bone," said Tombstone.

"Yo're a philosopher," said Hap.

"Presbyterian," corrected Tombstone. "I've heard that my great grandfather, Presby Jones, started the organization. He came over on the Mayflower."

"What was that?" asked Hap.

Tombstone stared at Hap Haggarty for several moments in amazement.

"Well, what is it, Tombstone?" said Speedy.

"Mayflower? Why—well, I dunno exactly. But I heard he did."

Sunshine Sims, the sheriff, came in and after looking curiously at the two strangers with Hap, sauntered over to look at the poker game.

"That's our doughty sheriff," whispered Hap.

"Ought to have a long mustache and two guns," said Speedy seriously.

"We go more for brains than hair," said Hap. "What are yuh drinkin'?"

As they ordered their drinks a man came in. He was a skinny, old rawhider, white as a rabbit, with a long flat-cheeked face, a crooked nose and gimlet-like eyes. He shook the water off his old sombrero. He was wearing an old, black slicker, torn in spots, which he proceeded to shuck off his narrow shoulders.

"Hyah, Tom," greeted one of the men at the poker-table. "Kind of damp."

Tombstone had turned, drink in hand, staring at the man.

"Spook, you old son-of-a-gun!" he exclaimed. "Spook don't yuh know me?"

The effect was electrical. The hard-faced old rannihan's slicker had not fallen to the floor yet, when he went into action. In a second his gun was flaming, and Tombstone's sombrero went sailing into the back-bar. Men were diving for safety, poker-chips went clattering, a leg split off a chair, as one of the poker players went over backwards.

The next shot missed Tombstone, smacked into a cluster of pool balls on the table, one ball receiving most of the blow, hit a cowboy in the Adam's apple, and he went down, waving his cue. The man was backing swiftly toward the doorway, and his third shot was fired, just as his heel tripped against the threshold, and the bullet made a huge spider-web on the back-bar mirror. The shooter fell outside, scrambled to his feet and went racing toward the hitch-rack.

Tombstone, bare-headed, was still leaning against the bar, drink in hand. He was the only man in the place still on his feet. Speedy

and Hap were flat on the floor, the bartender was down behind the bar, two poker players were under the table, two more behind the stove. One cowboy was sitting on the floor against the wall, holding a chair in front of himself.

"My gosh, what's wrong with Tom Greener?" gasped one of the men.

"Fast, but not accurate," said Tombstone, and took his drink.

The sheriff, followed by Hap Haggarty, ran for the doorway, with several more behind them. The old rannihan was having trouble mounting his horse, but he managed to get aboard, sent one more shot toward the men in the doorway, and then raced out of town.

SUNSHINE SIMMS and Hap Haggarty were not particular what horses they took. The nearest ones at the hitch-rack were good enough. Two other cowboys counted and went along in a swift race to capture the man.

"The danged old fool headed west!" a man in the saloon said. "That old dry-wash is runnin' like a mill-race, and they'll get him sure. He can't swim it!"

Buck Short, former sheriff, leaned against the bar, his mouth shut in a grim line. He had come from his place behind the old stove.

"What'd you call him?" he said to Tombstone.

"Spook," replied Tombstone. "Name's Spook McGee. I worked with him twelve years ago in New Mexico. Never did know what became of him. Darned old fool blowed up like a firecracker, didn't he!"

"Look at my back-bar!" wailed the bartender.

"Look at my neck," said a cowboy in a husky whisper. "Pool-ball."

"I can't figure it," complained the bartender. "Just a harmless old prospector, and he explodes like dynamite."

"Didn't even rattle before he struck," remarked Tombstone.

"Spook McGee," mused one of the cowboys. "Named himself Tom Greener."

"Been here a couple of years," added the bartender. "Hope he pays for that mirror."

"Mind givin' me back my hat?" asked Tombstone of the bartender.

The bartender had walked all over the old sombrero, but Tombstone cuffed it back into shape and looked at the jagged hole through the crown. "Just a little too close for comfort," remarked the bartender.

"Look at my neck," whispered the cowboy. "It's bad enough to get hit with a bullet —but with a pool-ball—ugg."

Buck Short walked to the doorway and looked out at the rain.

The leaden sky seemed to rest on the roof-tops.

"If he went west, he's sunk," said someone. "He'll never cross that old wash. What do you think, Buck?"

"Pretty bad," agreed Buck, and came back.

It was nearly an hour before the bedraggled posse returned. None of them had been dressed for that ride, and they were wet to the skin.

"No catch'm, eh?" asked the bartender.

Sunshine Sims, who looked like anything but sunshine, shook his head.

"Tom Greener, or whatever his right name might be, is gone." he said, "and I don't mean he got across the wash."

"Yuh mean—he drowned?" asked Buck Short.

"He shore did," agreed Hap Haggarty. "Gimme somethin' to drink. We almost got him before he reached the wash. He knowed that he couldn't get away, so he went right off a high bank. We seen him and his horse turn over a couple times, but there wasn't anythin' we can do about it. That blamed wash is a hundred feet wide, and that water is cuttin' like a steam-shovel."

"Nothin' could have lived in it," added Sunshine Sims. "Come on, Hap. Let's get some dry clothes."

"Where'd the old boy stay?" asked Tombstone.

"Out at the old Trail End mine," said the bartender. "It's back there in the hills about nine, ten miles from here. It was abandoned years ago after a lot of money had been spent on it. He lived there alone. Said he was tryin' to find the lost vein. The whole hill is honeycombed with tunnels."

"I think I'll go back to the Bradded H," remarked Buck Short. "It don't look like this rain is ever goin' to stop." He turned to Tombstone.

"How long since you seen this feller?"

"About twelve years," replied Tombstone. "Shucks, I never had no trouble with him. I don't know why he busted up thataway. I'd plumb forgot him, until I seen his face. Spook McGee was his name at that time."

"Never had no trouble with him, eh?"

"Yeah."

"When?"

"About a hour ago," said Tombstone dryly. "Wasn't you here?"

Buck Short walked out, without any reply. The bartender laughed.

"That'll hold Buck for a while," he said. "He thinks he's still sheriff."

"Let's go get a room," said Speedy. "I'd like to stretch out."

COMING NEXT ISSUE

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STAGE LINE TO HELL

An Alamo Paige Story of the Pony Express

By

REEVE WALKER

CHAPTER III

Bullets from Ambush

OLD Joe Page, the hotelkeeper, was loaded with questions. He had heard the shots, saw the man escape in the rain, and later saw the posse return without him.

"Was he shootin' at somebody?"

"Not particularly," replied Tombstone. "Yore rooms don't leak, do they?"

"Not particularly," replied the old man dryly. "Who done the shootin'?"

"A feller they call Tom Greener," replied Speedy.

"Oh, that old prospector! Why, he's as harmless as a rabbit."

"Well," said Tombstone, "he's shore more demonstrative than a rabbit, I'll say that much for him. He tried to cross the wash and drowned himself."

"Heavenly days! Drowned himself, eh?"

"Died clean," said Speedy.

"Well, well! It just goes to show."

"That's right." Speedy nodded.

"Goes to show what?" asked Tombstone.

"That a boat is better than a horse in a fix like that," said Speedy. "How much are yore rooms, Mister?"

"Page is the name. Joe Page. Four-bits a day—in advance. Three dollars a week, also in advance."

"Give him four-bits, Tombstone," grinned Speedy. "You ain't takin' no chances."

"Yuh save four-bits if yuh pay for a whole week," said Page.

Tombstone took off his hat and showed the old man the hole in the crown.

"I pay for my sleep as I go," he said quietly. "If the next feller shoots lower, I only lose four-bits. I'd hate to die and still have a couple, or three sleeps, comin' to me."

"I see what yuh mean," nodded the old man. "I don't blame yuh."

Joe Page left them in their room, and they removed some of their wet clothes. Speedy was serious.

"You opened yore big mouth over there and almost got us shot," he said.

"Yea-a-ah," drawled Tombstone. "But how'd I know the old galoot was goin' to bust thataway.?"

"Where did yuh know him?" asked Speedy.

"Yuh want the truth, do yuh?"

"Well, I'd kind of like the truth, Tombstone."

"Yeah. Well, six, seven years ago I had a argument with a city marshal. When it was over, Mr. Marshal was tied upside down in a tree, with his star pinned on the seat of his

Tombstone was staring at the doorway, his eyes wide with terror.

pants. His posse got me later, and they shoved me into the coop. In the next cell was a cold rannihan who looked a heap like the old coot over in the Broadway today. His name was Spook McGee. I just took a chance and called him by that name—and look what happened."

"What was he in jail for, Tombstone?"

"I dunno. After what he done today, mebbe it was murder."

Hap Haggarty, the deputy sheriff, came up to see them later. Hap was no diplomat.

"The sheriff told me to come up here," he said. "He kind of wants to find out who you two fellers are, what yuh're doin' down here, and what yuh know about the old coot that took the high dive into the wash today. He said for me to kind of go easy, and not let yuh know I was lookin' for information."

"Just off-hand like, huh?" asked Speedy.

"That's right. Talk little and listen hard."

"Well, we ain't what we seem to be, Hap," said Tombstone soberly. "Lookin' at me, you wouldn't suspect that my family owned half the state of Texas, would yuh?"

"No, I wouldn't," admitted Hap.

"And that I could write a check for a million dollars, huh?"

"The same answer," said Hap soberly.

Tombstone chuckled. "My disguise is perfect," he said thoughtfully.

"Yuh're lyin' ain't yuh," said Hap. "What do yuh know about Tom Greener, the person you called Spook McGee—and almost got yourself a harp?"

"Poor old Spook," sighed Tombstone. "A awful end for a brilliant mind. Well, sir, I first knowed Spook in college. A great student. Old Spook. After college he became a inventor. He made a machine to take the knot-holes out of boards, and then he made a portable post-hole. They folded up, and yuh could carry a hundred on a buckboard. Then he tried to invent a cross-cut saw with a blade on both sides, so yuh could cut down two trees at the same time, but he got to drinkin' and——"

"I asked yuh what do yuh know about Tom Greener, alias Spook McGee," reminded Hap Haggarty.

"Not a thing," replied Tombstone honestly. "I never seen him before in my life."

"Yuh never?" gasped Hap. "Then why'd yuh call him Spook McGee?"

"He reminded me of Spook McGee, my old college chum."

"I reckon I'll go back to the office," said Hap. "The next thing I know I'll be blattin' like a sheep."

HE TURNED and looked at the sober-faced Speedy.

"How do you stand him?" asked Hap.

"Ba-a-a-a!" bleated Speedy and never changed expression.

Hap moved gingerly away, looked back at them and shook his head, as he went into the hallway and closed the door behind him.

"It looks like it might quit rainin' pretty soon," said Tombstone.

"Yeah," agreed Speedy, "it might. There ain't a cloud on the ceilin'."

* * * * *

Jim Hope, owner of the Bradded H, came in to see Sunshine Sims, the sheriff, that evening. Hope didn't like Sunshine Sims. Buck Short had been foreman of the Bradded H before he became sheriff and Hope had backed his campaign in every way. Now that Buck Short was without a job, Jim Hope had made him foreman of the Bradded H again.

Jim Hope didn't want to take up matters with Sunshine Sims, but Hope had been hit in the pocket-book, and he needed help. Sunshine looked him over thoughtfully, as Jim Hope explained that the slain cattle detective, Bob Welch, had been sent there by the association to investigate rustling.

"Not that yuh're worth a cuss as a sheriff, yuh understand," explained the tall, gray-haired cow-man. "But I thought yuh ought to know that the Bradded H is bein' robbed. I've lost at least fifty calves in the last six months. No cows—just calves."

"Yuh kind of jump at conclusions, don't yuh, Hope?" asked Sunshine.

"How do yuh mean, Sims?"

"Brandin' me as no good. Buck Short didn't find yore calves, did he?"

"N-n-no, I can't say that he did."

"I'm just a Johnny-come-lately on this job," said Sunshine. "Yuh're losin' calves. You send to the association for a man. Somebody kills him. Buck Short can't find an answer. That's what yuh came to tell me eh?"

"Just about that," admitted Jim Hope.

"Hm-m-m-m," mused Sunshine. "I'll have to look into this."

"Hop to it," sighed the cattleman. "It's got me beat. What happened to Tom Greener? Buck told me he shot three times at a high-pocket puncher in the Broadway Saloon, high-tailed it out of town and drowned in the wash."

THE sheriff nodded. "Yeah, that's right. Went right off a steep bank and hit the water. The feller he shot was a tall puncher named Tombstone Jones. I sent Hap up to try and find out what this Jones knows about Tom Greener, and Hap came back, talkin' to himself—somethin' about portable post-holes and sheep."

"What caused Greener to start shootin'?" asked Jim Hope.

"Well, I don't know exactly. Somebody said that this tall puncher called him Spook. Everybody was kind of confused, I reckon. Anyway, I know I was."

Jim Hope nodded. "I suppose we'll never find the body," he said. "It'll be twenty feet deep under silt and sand. Just as well, I suppose."

"I'm shippin' Bob Welch's body away tonight," said the sheriff. "The association sent me an order. I don't suppose Welch found out anythin'."

"I reckon somebody was mighty scared he would," remarked Hope. "See what yuh can do, Sims."

"I don't promise anythin', Hope."

"I don't expect anythin'," replied Hope, "so that makes us even."

* * * * *

The rain ceased that night and in a few hours the deep washes were mere trickles of water. Tombstone and Speedy saddled their horses and rode along the west wash, looking for the body of Spook McGee, or whatever his right name might be. The sheriff and deputy were making a search, too, but to no avail. That torrent had moved thousands of tons of silt and sand, and in places it had torn away acres of desert land, creating a new channel. Tombstone and Speedy met the two officers along the old wash. Tombstone looped a long leg around his saddle-horn, relaxed completely and began the manufacture of a cigarette.

"I have heard that Tom Greener was an old friend of yours, Jones." remarked the sheriff.

Tombstone inhaled deeply. "A terrible end for a great man," he said solemnly, gazing out over the old wash. "Eddicatd, ree-fined, raised in the lap of luxury, died in a flood and buried in the mud. No one to shed a tear, no benefit of clergy, his re-queem, the howl of a coyote."

"You read that somewhere," said Hap soberly.

"He had his faults," sighed Tombstone.

"Couldn't shoot straight," said Speedy.

Tombstone took off his battered sombrero and ran a finger through the hole in the crown.

"Right in line, but a little high," he said quietly.

"What did you say he invented?" asked Hap. "Portable post-holes?"

"Yeah," Tombstone nodded solemnly. "I reckon that secret died with him."

"That's the craziest idea I ever heard," declared the sheriff.

"Folks said the same thing about Webster, when he invented the dictionary," said Tombstone soberly. "They laughed at Spook McGee, too, just like they laughed at my grandfather."

"What was yore grandfather?" asked Hap Haggarty.

"Funny," replied Tombstone.

"I can see now what yuh meant, Hap," said the sheriff. "Let's get goin'. See yuh later, gents."

THEY watched the two officers ride away.

"I wonder what Hap told him, Tombstone," Speedy said.

"Some bald-faced lie, probably," sighed Tombstone. "Yuh can't trust the veracity of anybody these days."

Old Joe Page, the hotel-keeper, had told them where the old Trail End mine was situated so they decided to ride out there. It was merely something to do.

"We're here to find out who's to blame for killin' that cattle detective," Tombstone told Speedy. "We won't find out on the main street of Antelope Wells."

The hills surrounding Bitter River Valley were, as Speedy observed, mostly standin' on edge. They were brushy, rocky and uninviting. Tombstone and speedy rode slowly, heading in the general direction of the Trail End mine. They were in no particular hurry.

They were cutting along the side of a hill when Tombstone drew up his horse. Two coyotes were sitting on the opposite side of the swale, intently watching something down in the brush. Tombstone drew his six-shooter and smacked a bullet squarly between them. At the impact of the bullet the two coyotes disappeared like twin shadows.

The two cowboys laughed and rode on.

"I wonder what they was watchin' down there," Speedy said.

The crossed the swale and looked around in the brush. There was something there, all right, but they were unable to see just what it was, so they rode down into the bottom. The object proved to be a spotted calf, both front legs broken. Tombstone quickly put the suffering animal out of its misery.

"Well, there's one Bradded H calf that ain't been stolen," said Speedy.

"Yeah," said Tombstone. "They didn't—oh-oh!" He knelt down and looked at the brand on the calf.

"Anythin' wrong with that?" asked Speedy.

"Not if yuh want to brand thataway," replied Tombstone. "That calf was hair-branded, Speedy."

"Hair-branded with the Bradded H? Why on earth would the Bradded H hair-brand their own calves? In a few weeks there won't be no brand to show and——"

Zing-g-g-g!

A bullet glanced off a rock within a foot of Speedy's knee, and went into the hillside. The next one struck the dead calf, after passing between Tombstone's long legs, and the two cowboys went into the brush like cottontails hunting for a hole. The reports of the two rifle shots came from further up on the hill.

"Are yuh all right?" yelled Tombstone, deep in the brush.

"I—will—be—as soon as I get my feet down out of this manzanita bush," panted Speedy. "Yuh ain't hurt?"

"Skinned my knee," replied Tombstone. "What's the idea, anyway?"

"Reasons," replied Speedy, "is immaterial. Can yuh see anybody?"

"Not where I'm lookin'."

"Get yore long nose out of the dirt," advised Speedy. "It's a cinch they ain't under yuh. There go our horses! Why, the nut-headed——"

Tombstone's six-shooter blasted twice.

"That'll learn yuh!" he yelled.

Pwee-e-e-e! Pwee-e-e-e

Two bullets whined off the rocks, and the two shots rattled the hills.

"You learned 'em," remarked Speedy sadly. "Better stop yore eddicatin' folks, before one of us gets some harp lessons."

"I know where they are," said Tombstone.

"The knowledge is mutual," remarked Speedy, and added, "Too mutual. We better move, pardner. If we can snake over this ridge, we'll be all right."

They did it. It was a slow, painful trip, but they made it, sprawling together at a rocky point to scan the opposite side of the swale. They could see their two horses, standing together about a half-mile down the draw, apparently watching the side of the hill. Tombstone grinned sourly as he rolled a cigarette.

"They're ridin' herd on them two broncs," he said. "Waitin' for us to try and pick 'em up."

"And then gun us down?" asked Speedy.

"What's yore opinion?"

"I've always been a trustin' soul," sighed Speedy. "I can't believe that anybody'd be that small. And my pa always said that Westerners was all big-hearted folks. Mebbe the country is gettin' overcrowded."

Tombstone ground his cigarette into the dirt and hitched up his belt.

"I've got me an idea," he announced. "You stay here."

"I was goin' to, anyway," replied Speedy. "Try not to get killed."

Tombstone slid down the hill, turning to the left, and disappeared in the heavy brush. Speedy studied their two horses, standing down there in an open space of the swale. Evidently the two shooters were up on the side of the swale to the right of the horses, waiting for them to come down to their mounts.

Tombstone found the traveling rather difficult, but he didn't mind. He hunched through the brush, crossed the crest again and dropped down in a quarter-circle behind the spot where the bushwhackers might be hidden. It required nearly an hour of cautious traveling.

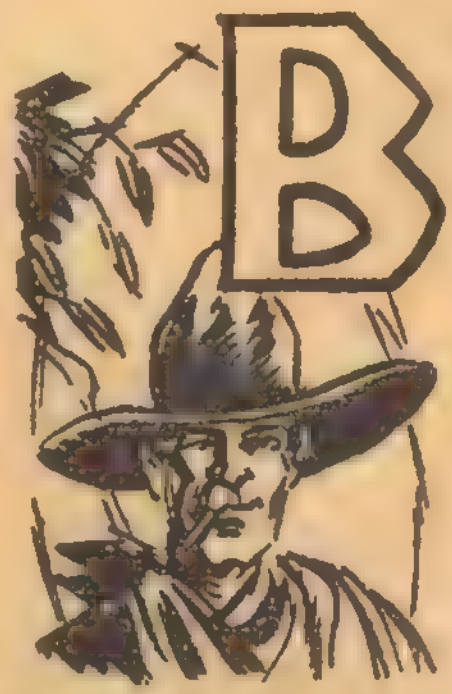
He could see the horses, and he could see the spot where Speedy was half-asleep in the rocks. Then he took his bearings and really began his stalk, inching his way down, avoiding thorny bushes as much as possible, and being very careful where he placed a foot. The recent rain had soaked everything, and this was a big help.

In fact, he came so quietly that he almost walked into the two men, who were sprawled behind a rocky outcropping, their two rifles resting cross the rock in front of them. They were not ten feet away, entirely oblivious to the fact that he was behind them, until he drawled out a question.

"Was you-all expectin' somebody, gents?"

CHAPTER IV

"Spook's" Cabin



BOTH men flinched at Tombstone's words. For the moment they were not even able to turn their heads.

"Please don't move yore hands," Tombstone said quietly. "That's fine. If yuh don't mind, I'll just stoop over and pluck them stingers from yore holsters. Very good. If you'll give them two rifles a gentle nudge, they'll slide off the edge. I don't want to leave yuh anythin' that might tempt yuh. That's it—shove 'em over. Good. Now yuh can relax and look at papa."

Slowly the two men twisted around and looked at Tombstone. They were not at all handsome. One was a faded blond colorless sort of person, with a crooked nose and high cheek-bones. The other was short, dark, badly in need of a shave. He peered at Tombstone through little, monkey-like eyes.

Tombstone grinned. "Welcome to our party."

"Who the devil are you?" snarled the dark one.

"That's what I say," added the blond.

"Go ahead and say it, you danged parrot," Tombstone was smiling.

"What'sa idea—you stickin' us up?"

"Oh, just havin' fun. Surprised yuh, eh?" Tombstone stood up and yelled: "Speedy! Speedy! Come on down!"

"Blasted rustlers!" snarled the dark one.

Tombstone laughed shortly. "Rustlers, eh? That's a good one. Where do you two fellers fit into this here landscape?"

"You long-legged fool, we're ridin' for the Bradded H!"

"Yuh are? Well, they ought to be proud to have a couple common dry-gulchers ridin' for 'em. Yuh tried to kill us a while ago, and now yuh lay in ambush, waitin' for us to come back to our horses."

Neither man denied it. The evidence was all against them. Speedy came down the swale and climbed up to them.

"Meet a couple innocent Bradded H riders, Speedy," said Tombstone.

"Pleased to meet yuh," said Speedy soberly. "How's everythin'?"

The blond one cleared his throat harshly and tried to smile.

"We—u-u-uh—thought you was rustlin' our calves," he explained.

"Think of a better one," Speedy advised him. "We found a crippled calf down there in the brush, and we put it out of its misery. Then you pelicanos tried to kill us."

"Yuh see—" began the blond, but the other one stopped him.

"Shut up, Roche!" he snapped.

"Might as well," sighed Tombstone. "Where-at is yore horses?"

"None of yore business!"

"Suits me. Speedy get our broncs."

Speedy went down the slope, heading for the horses.

"What are you goin' to do, High Pockets?" the dark one said.

"We're leadin' you two to Antelope Wells."

"Leadin' us? Why, you lantern-jawed, crane-legged—"

"And if yuh get tired of walkin'—yuh can run awhile."

Speedy came with the horses, and quickly untied the ropes from the saddles. Tombstone was very adept with a lariat. He drew the loop tight under the dark one's arm-pits, and threw a half-hitch around his neck.

"Your hands are free—in case yuh fall," Tombstone remarked. "Hold this rope, Speedy, while I pack up the other one."

"Wait a minute," pleaded the dark man. "We ain't walkin' to town. Our horses are up there in the brush."

"That is none of our business—if yuh remember yore own words," replied Tombstone soberly. "Anyway, we don't know exactly where to look, and we don't like to waste time. There, Mister, I reckon you'll lead. Come on. Speedy, you take the roan one."

"I'll cut yore black heart out!" wailed the blond one. "I'll fix yuh!"

"Don't pull back or that half-hitch will shut off yore wind," advised Speedy.

* * * * *

Jim Hope, Buck Short, Hap Haggerty and Sunshine Sims were in the sheriff's office, talking about Tom Greener, whom Tombstone had called "Spook" McGee. It was late in the afternoon, but no trace had been found of either horse or rider.

"There's somethin' queer behind this deal," said Hope. "Yuh ought to find out more about this Jones person."

"You do it," said Hap quickly. "I tried it. I've met a lot of liars in my life but this Tombstone Jones—oh-oh! Who's this?"

Hap stepped to the doorway, followed by the other men. Tombstone and Speedy had arrived with their weary, sore-footed prisoners, who sank down on the sidewalk.

"What on earth?" Jim Hope was amazed. "Tex Eaton and Ames Roche—roped!"

"Do you know these canaries?" asked Speedy.

"Tell 'em," wailed "Tex" Eaton. "They've made us walk our feet off."

HAP seemed amused. "What happened?" he asked.

"They shot twice at us, and then tried to ambush us later," said Tombstone.

"Wouldn't let us ride our horses," wailed Roche. "My feet are ruined."

Speedy was grinning. "They hid their horses. Told us it was none of our business where they were cached. We didn't want to wring it out of them."

"We thought they was rustlers," wailed Ames Roche.

"We argued yuh out of that lie on the way in," Tombstone reminded him.

"But these are two of my riders," protested Jim Hope.

"You can have 'em," said Tombstone. "They're kind of second-hand, as yuh might say, but it'll learn 'em to not shoot at innocent folks."

"I think yuh're a little high-handed, if yuh ask me," snarled Buck Short.

"You ain't seen nothin' yet," replied the tall puncher. "Here, you take the rope and unpeel 'em. I don't want to soil my hands."

Tombstone tossed his rope to Buck Short, who proceeded to untie the two men. Roche glared his hate at Tombstone.

"I'll pay you back for this, blast yuh," he snarled. "You can't do this to me, and get away with it."

"That's what I say," added Tex Eaton.

"You fellers sure ditto each other's remarks," said Speedy. "And don't forget that yuh failed twice."

[*Turn page*]

"I could use a drink," said Tex wearily, and the two of them limped across the street with Buck Short.

Sunshine Sims drew a deep breath and looked at Tombstone. Jim Hope grinned weakly. The humor of the situation began to percolate.

"Just what caused all this to happen, Jones?" he asked.

Tombstone told them about the crippled calf, but did not mention the hair-brand. They listened intently as Tombstone told them about the shots that had narrowly missed them, and how the two men had waited, with rifles ready, for them to come to the horses.

"Of course, the boys have been watchin' for rustlers," Hope said.

"With orders to shoot anybody they saw?" asked Speedy.

"No, they never had any such an order. I don't understand it."

"It was a Bradded H calf," said Tombstone. "Somethin' probably ran it off the ridge, and it had a bad fall. Mebbe a lobo. Quien sabe?"

"Could yuh find the calf again, Jones?"

"I think so. But it's too late now."

"I'll come in early in the mornin'. Will yuh show me?"

"Yeah, I'll be glad to do it."

Jim Hope thanked Tombstone, and went over to the Broadway Saloon.

Hap Haggerty grinned. "Good work, Tombstone—but watch 'em. Eaton and Roche are plenty forked."

"That makes me one mass of goose-pimples," declared Speedy. "I just can't stand violence in any form."

Sunshine Sims was thoughtful for quite a while.

"It's kind of funny that they'd shoot at yuh for no reason," he said, at last.

"Mebbe they had a reason," suggested Tombstone. Sims squinted at Tombstone.

"I wonder if you know what that reason was, Tombstone."

"I'm wonderin', too," said Tombstone.

"Yea-a-ah. Yuh know, it's strange that Tom Greener busted loose and tried to kill yuh—and then Eaton and Roche attemptin' the same thing. It don't make sense."

"Yuh'd almost think he had a bulls-eye painted on his hide," said Speedy soberly. "But the shootin' has been very bad."

"I don't know anythin' about Tom Greener's shootin' ability, but Eaton and Roche are good shots. Maybe they just wanted to scare yuh."

"Well, they sure done it," said Tombstone. "I just shook all over, like I had a chill. I scare easy, I'll tell yuh that much. I was raised a pet. Pa always told me to look out for strange men. That's why I'm so shy around strangers."

"Yeah, you act shy," agreed Hap. "When Tom Greener was throwin' lead all over the Broadway, yuh didn't even move."

"Too scared," said Tombstone soberly. "Anyway, in a case like that, the thing to do is stand still. If yuh go prancin' around, yuh might get hit. And more than that—I didn't want to spill my drink."

JIM HOPE and Buck Short came in early next morning, and Tombstone and Speedy guided them out to the dead calf. The calf was there, but somebody had skinned out the brand.

Jim Hope examined the calf but, without the brand, it could have been anybody's property. Buck Short swore a little. Finally Jim Hope turned to Tombstone.

"Why would anybody skin out that brand, Tombstone?"

Tombstone hunkered down and rolled a cigarette before replying.

"Oh, I dunno, Hope," he said. "Mebbe they wanted to frame it."

"Are yuh sure it was a Bradded H?"

"I've been lookin' at brands since I was six, Mr. Hope."

"Was it made with a runnin'-iron?" Buck Short asked.

Tombstone shook his head. "Not unless you've got a pretty good brand artist on yore spread," he said. "No, I'd say it was the mark of a stamp-iron. I had a close look at it, before them coyotes started throwin' lead at us."

Jim Hope studied the hill above the dead calf, seeking to find out how it was injured.

"I ain't consulted my crystal ball," Speedy said, "but my hunch is that the calf was range-branded, got away with a couple legs tied up, and fell down here."

Buck Short snorted. "That's a devil of a theory! Our outfit don't use a stamp-iron, except at the brandin' corrals. All range-brandin' is done with a runnin'-iron. You ought to know that, Smith."

"I'm new to this kind of thing," Speedy said apologetically. "Yuh see I'm sort of a tenderfoot. Tombstone will tell yuh that I never seen a cow until a couple weeks ago. I even fall off a horse once in a while. But I'm learnin'."

Buck Short looked at Speedy, noting the natural curve of his legs, the well-worn high-heel boots, the bent elbows of a man who spends most of his time in the saddle, and he knew Speedy Smith was lying.

"He took up cowpunchin' for his health," explained Tombstone. "He was all punied down from workin' in a office. When I first seen him, I didn't think he'd live a week. Just skin and bones.

"'Mr. Jones,' his father said to me. "'If yuh'll make a man out of this, I'll give yuh ten thousand dollars.' I said to him, 'Mr. Smith, you didn't give me much to work on, but I'll take the dare.' He wanted me to do it in six months.

"'I'll try and get his eyes uncrossed in

six months,' I said, 'but it'll take six years to make him worth takin' back home.' I ain't exactly proud of what I've done already, but I can see improvement. Physically, he does show how hard I've worked on him, but mentally—well, I'm doin' the very best I can. You'll excuse him for makin' that remark, I hope."

"Yeah," agreed Buck Short vaguely.

"Well, thanks, boys, for leadin' us here," said Jim Hope. "Drop out to the Bradded H, when yuh're ridin' around. Glad to have yuh."

"Thank yuh, Mr. Hope," said Tombstone. "We might do that."

Jim Hope and Buck Short rode back down the swale.

"You long-legged knot-head!" Speedy said. "Just because I lied mild-like, you have to rub it in. Some day I'll find yuh with yore head caught in a fence, and I'll shore—"

"You ain't convincin'," interrupted Tombstone. "Never seen a cow until a couple weeks ago! That sort of lyin' never gets yuh any place. I made up a reason for yuh bein' here."

"My pa payin' you ten thousand dollars!"

"Well, yeah, that was a lie, Speedy. But I'll bet that if yore pa could see what I've done for yuh in a couple of years—"

"He'd probably shoot both of us," said Speedy.

They rode to the top of the swale and stopped to look things over. Far beyond, hugged in against the side of the hill, they could see the gaunt outlines of the old shaft-house at the Trail End mine.

"Might as well ride up there and find out what sort of a hangout Old Spook McGee had," suggested Tombstone. "It ain't more'n a couple miles."

"Suits me," said Speedy.

"Fine. Don't fall off on the way up there, and if I see a cow, I'll tell yuh what it is."

"And," added Speedy dryly, "if pa pays you the ten thousand dollars, we'll split it."

"He won't," sighed Tombstone. "Because he stipulated that I make a man out of yuh."

Much money had been spent on the Trail End mine. The shaft was down over a thousand feet, and the whole mountain was honeycombed with tunnels. The shaft house was only a gaunt skeleton against the sky. The machinery gone. There were several old shacks scattered around on the hillside, but the desert growth had moved in, almost obliterating all signs of former industry.

A WORN trail through the brush brought them to Spook McGee's former abode. The shack was unlocked. They opened the door and walked inside. Two broken and patched windows admitted a little light. There was tumbled blankets on the bunk, food on the shelves, and stacks of wood on the floor.

"A homey lookin' hive," remarked Speedy, inspecting the place. "Old Spook wasn't any prize housekeeper, with gee-raniums on the winder and lace curtains on the door, but he done all right. I like it."

Speedy proceeded to straighten the blankets, sprawl on the bunk and enjoy a cigarette.

"Get over," ordered Tombstone, pulling off his boots. "This is better than a hotel room. I'll re-lax a little myself."

They both relaxed. In fact, it was after sundown when they awoke. That side of the mountain was nearly in darkness. Speedy yawned.

"How about cookin' us a meal here, before we ride back?" he asked.

"Yea-a-ah, that's a right good idea," agreed Tombstone. "I seen eggs and bacon over there in that box-cupboard, and there's plenty coffee. Mix up a flock of biscuits, too—if yuh don't mind. Hop right to it, pardner. I'll eat anything yuh cook."

"That big mouth of mine," sighed Speedy, pulling on his boots.

He lighted the old oil lamp and proceeded to cook a meal while Tombstone sat on the bunk and voiced his assistance. It was very quiet up there. The door was wide open, as they sat at the little table. Tombstone was facing the doorway.

"Yuh know I like to live thisaway, Speedy," Tombstone said. "Nobody to bother yuh. Yell all yuh like, and nobody cares. Food tastes better, too. Pass me some more coffee, slave."

Tombstone held out his cup and Speedy lifted the pot from the corner of the table. But as Speedy poured, the cup went lower and lower, until Speedy was pouring on the floor. He looked at Tombstone, who was staring at the doorway, his eyes wide with terror. Tombstone was slowly getting to his feet against the table, and his belt-buckle was hooked under the table-top, which was getting up with him. Food and utensils were sliding past Speedy, who seemed fascinated by the expression on Tombstone's face.

Then Speedy jerked back from the table and whirled around. Framed in the doorway, staring at them, his old face the color of wood ashes, his hair matted, stood Spook McGee, unmoving, unblinking.

"John Henry G-g-osh!" yelled Tombstone, and dived for the back window.

COMING NEXT ISSUE

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VANISHING TRAILS

A Smashing Range Feud Novelet

By R. S. LERCH

PLUS MANY OTHER EXCITING YARNS

CHAPTER V

Broken Window

THERE was only one pane of glass left, when Tombstone hit it. His idea was good, but his estimation was very bad. He stuck at the half-way point, both long legs waving in the air. Speedy tried to go under the bunk, but one of those flailing boots hit him in the right ear, and he went down on the floor, for the moment too dazed to know what happened.

Then he realized what he had seen, got quickly to his feet and leaned against the bunk. There was no one in the doorway. Tombstone was trying to get back into the shack again, so Speedy grasped one leg and pulled very hard. Tombstone came back almost too fast. He caught his balance and went through the doorway in three strides, with Speedy very close behind him.

It wasn't too dark for them to find their horses.

"Wait a minute, you danged, limber whippoorwill!" Speedy said. "There ain't no—no—no ghost, Tombstone!"

"Ain't, huh?" gasped Tombstone, his frightened horse turning around and around with him.

"He wasn't there—in the doorway!" panted Speedy, getting into his saddle. "I looked—after you stuck in the window—and he wasn't there."

"Good reason," said Tombstone huskily. "He was behind the house—lookin' me in the face. Come on."

They headed down the old trail, and nothing less than a ghost, mounted on Seabiscuit, could have traveled in their dust. They kept right on going until they struck the main road to Antelope Wells. Tombstone drew up and let Speedy come in beside him.

"Scared yuh, huh?" asked Speedy.

"I think I was more amazed than scared, Speedy."

"Yeah, I reckon there was somethin' that made yuh move fast. The idea of a feller yore size, tryin' to go out through a little window like that."

"Where'd you go?" asked Tombstone.

"I stood m' ground. Where could I go? You had the window plugged."

"Well, I'll be best-man to a buzzard!" grunted Tombstone. "Old Spook McGee is hauntin' the Trail End. Did yuh see his face, Speedy? Drowned men always look like that—kind of putty-like. And he still had silt in his hair."

"He—he didn't speak, did he?" asked Speedy.

"Huh? Speak? Dead men don't speak, Speedy."

"Don't, huh? Why not?"

"Don't ask me—ask a ghost."

"I'll take yore word for it. We ain't waitin' here for him, are we?"

"I hope not. Come on."

"Yuh know," remarked Tombstone, as they rode toward Antelope Wells, "at first I had a good notion to take a shot at—at that—uh—thing. I was about to draw and shoot, when I realized that yuh can't kill a ghost."

"Yuh wasn't scared?" asked Speedy soberly.

"Scared? Me scared of a ghost? Why, they can't hurt anybody."

"Just where was yuh intendin' to go, when yuh hit that window?"

"Fresh air," replied Tombstone quickly. "I can't stand a close room."

"Not close to a ghost," added Speedy dryly. "I don't have to lie. I was scared stiff. I never got a good look at Spook McGee when he was alive, but I know a dead man when I see one."

"It was Spook McGee, all right," said Tombstone. "But let's forget the old man's ghost and concentrate on not meetin' him again."

They stabled their horses in Antelope Wells, went over to the hotel and cleaned up a little.

The restaurant in the hotel was closed, so they went down the street to Louie-Go-Boom's little restaurant.

"I shore hope that no ghost ruins this meal," Speedy said.

"Forget the ghost," cautioned Tombstone. "There ain't no ghosts, anyway."

"If there ain't, yuh sure like divin' exercise before yuh eat a meal," said Speedy dryly.

There was only one other person in the restaurant—a rather fancy-looking Mexican, who didn't even look at them. Louie was a short, bland-faced Chinese, who rarely changed expression. He quickly wiped off a table at the extreme back of the room, and motioned for them to sit down.

There were other tables more convenient, but they went to the rear, where Louie quickly took their order.

"Backs to the wall, eh?" whispered Speedy. "Figure that one out."

The Mexican got up, tossed some silver on the counter and left the place. Louie put their food on the table and went away. No one else came in. They ate fast, for no reason whatever.

Louie came over to the table, and Tombstone paid him there.

"You come," Louie said. "More bettah you go back door."

WONDERING what this was all about, they followed Louie, who opened the rear door of the kitchen to let them out.

"What's the idea, Louie?" Tombstone asked.

"That Mesican he ask for you. He say mebbeso you come? I don' know. You come, he don't spik. Bettah you go back door. Good-night."

"Much obliged, Louie," said Tombstone. "We'll remember this."

They circled the next building and came down a narrow alley to the main street, where they cautiously looked down the sidewalk. The street was dark, except for the lights from the Broadway Saloon a little further up the street, and on the other side. Louie-Go-Boom's windows were the only illuminated ones on that side, and as they peered down the street, those lights went out.

"Somebody comin'," whispered Speedy. "Must have been at the corner of the cafe."

Tombstone shoved in against the corner. A man was advancing up the wooden sidewalk, moving slowly and carefully. He was walking in close to the building, and making very little noise. Once he stopped and waited quite a while, as though undecided what to do. Then he came on.

The tall, long-armed Tombstone reached out, yanked the man off his feet, twisted around with the man and fell on top of him in the alley. The man yelped something in Spanish, but it was cut off sharply. His feet flailed for a moment, until Speedy sat down on them.

Something clattered against the wall of the building.

"One gun, one knife," Tombstone said. "All right, feller—have a little sense. One yelp, and I'll tie yuh in a hard-knot. Sabe?"

"Si, si!" whispered the man huskily.

Tombstone helped the man to his feet. He had the man's arms twisted behind him.

"We'll take him up the back way, and examine him in the room," Tombstone said.

No one saw them go upstairs from the rear of the hotel. The man did not try to get away. After drawing the shades, Speedy lighted the lamp, and they sat the man down in a chair. His finery had dulled a little from the struggle in the alley, and he seemed only interested in rubbing circulation back in his arms.

"Senors, I do not onnerstand," he said painfully. "Why you tr'at me like those?"

"Too bad about you," said Speedy. "You wanted to see us."

The man stared at Speedy, and then his eyes narrowed.

"Those Chino lie!" he spat out.

Tombstone laughed at him. "Which proves that the Chino didn't lie," he said quietly. "What's yore name?"

"I am Chico Ramos. I have rancho een Mejico. I sell calf to Americano."

"Yuh do?" queried Tombstone. "Well, ain't that nice! Do yuh sell calves to Jim Hope?"

"Si, I sell heem many calf."

"Speedy," said Tombstone, "I'm commencin' to have a idea."

"It don't show on yuh—yet."

"Listen, Chico. Yuh don't mind if I call yuh Chico, do yuh? No? Fine. I've got a proposition for yuh. You tell me who is hair-brandin' the Bradded H calves and turnin' 'em over to you—and I'll—whoa! Wait, yuh blasted wolverine!"

Chico Ramos had all the agility of a wild animal. He popped out of that chair, touched the floor just once, and dived head-first through a window, taking shade, frame and glass with him. It was done so quickly that neither Tombstone nor Speedy had a chance to move. They heard the dull thump, as Ramos landed in the street. The ruined shade snapped back part way, came off the fixtures and fell into the room.

Tombstone rubbed the palm of his right hand on his knee, reached up to his shirt-pocket and took out his tobacco and papers.

"Sudden son-of-a-gun, wasn't he?" remarked Speedy, and went over to the window and looked out.

"Vamoso," he said and sat down, reaching for Tombstone's cigarette papers.

There were voices on the street.

"Here's part of the frame—and there's glass all over the sidewalk," someone said. "Somebody must have fell through a window."

"Come on," said Tombstone. He blew out the light, and they tiptoed down the back stairs, returning to the sidewalk near Louie-Go-Boom's cafe.

They found a number of people out in front, as they came along. Sunshine Sims and Hap Haggerty were standing around, talking with Joe Page, the hotelkeeper, wondering who fell out of the hotel.

"Shucks, our room is right up there," said Tombstone. "Let's go see."

They all went upstairs. Speedy lighted the lamp and they looked at the torn shade.

"We've been eatin' down at Louie's place," said Tombstone, which seemed explanation enough.

"Why the dickens would anybody jump through one of yore windows?" asked Sunshine Sims. "Who'd be in yore room, Tombstone?"

JOE PAGE was looking puzzled. "I never seen anybody go up there," he said. "Of course, I wasn't on the watch for anybody. That window is ruined. It'll cost me quite a bit for a new frame—and that shade is ruined, too."

"It kind of disturbs me," said Tombstone soberly. "Window-divin' is one of worst habits a man can get. I 'member a feller in

Wyomin'—"

"Come on, Hap," said the sheriff. "We'll look around. Mebbe we'll find some bunged-up feller."

"Look for flat feet," advised Speedy. "That's quite a jump."

Joe Page brought an old shade, larger than the other one, and tacked it over the window to keep the wind out.

"I hope it don't happen again," he said severely.

"If it does, you'll have to give us another room, Mr. Page," replied Tombstone soberly. "We crave light and a view."

"Yeahr-r-r-r!" growled the old man, and walked out.

"You was commencin' to have a idea," Speedy reminded him.

"It must have been a good one, judgin' from the actions of Mr. Ramos. It's a cinch he's takin' over the hair-branded calves—so we've got half the thing worked out, Speedy. All we've got to do is find out who's doin' the brandin'."

"And keep ourselves from bein' killed," added Speedy. "That blasted Ramos staked himself outside the door, intendin' to gun us down when we came out. Nice people. Now he'll tell the others how much we know, and I hate to think what'll happen to us."

"Yea-a-ah, that's right," agreed Tombstone.

Someone knocked on the door. Both men drew their guns before Tombstone spoke.

"Come in," he said.

It was Hap Haggerty. He flung his hat on the bed and sat down.

"You look irked," said Speedy.

"Irked? What's that?"

"Oh, it's a word I picked up somewhere. How are yuh, Hap?"

"All right. We didn't find the window-diver."

"It's a funny thing," sighed Tombstone. "Pickin' our room thataway."

"Uh-huh." Hap studied the faces of the two cowboys. "Yuh see, a awful lot of things have happened to you two fellers since yuh came here—and yuh can't explain nothin'."

"We're ignorant," said Speedy. "Awful ignorant."

"The first thing, Old Tom Greener shoots three times at yuh in the Broadway Saloon," enumerated Hap. "Then he drowns himself in the wash. Next thing you lead two of the Bradded H punchers into town, claimin' that they tried to kill yuh. And now—somebody does a dive through yore window—and yuh don't have an answer for any of it."

Speedy clapped his hands, but his face remained sober.

"What's that clappin' for?" asked Hap.

"Accuracy," replied Speedy. "And for tellin' it in a few words."

"Too much happenin' to yuh," insisted Hap.

"That ain't all," said Tombstone. "We seen a ghost today."

"Shucks!" Hap got to his feet and picked up his hat. At the door he paused. "Every time I come up here to talk sensible with you two, one of yuh starts lyin' to me."

"It was the ghost of Spook McGee," said Speedy.

"Huh?" Hap came back a few steps. "The ghost—aw, yuh're lyin'."

"Standin' in the doorway of his shack, face like putty, hair all plastered down with silt mud, eyes that can't see nothin'. Just standin' there."

Something in Tombstone's remark caused Hap to take a deep breath.

"I hope he don't haunt you, Hap," said Speedy. "You helped drive him to his death, yuh know."

"Well, for gosh sakes, I—I was just tryin' to catch him, Speedy. Me and Sunshine didn't kill him. He—he jumped his bronc into the flood."

"I just hope he don't haunt yuh, that's all."

"Aw, I—yuh're both lyin' to me now, blast yuh!"

"Wait'll yuh see him, Hap," said Speedy. "You'll apologize—then—if we can run yuh down."

Hap Haggerty sat down on the edge of a chair, his hat on his knees.

"There ain't no such thing as a ghost," he said flatly.

"That's right," agreed Speedy. "It's just folks' imagination. Tombstone imagined he saw the ghost of Spook McGee. I took a look and imagined the same thing. But will you tell us how in the devil we both saw the same thing? If there ain't no ghosts, how'd we both see the same dead man's face?"

"Did yuh—did yuh see his face, Speedy?"

"Just as plain as yore face is now. Putty-white, hair all matted and muddy, just like he washed up out of that flood."

"Gosh!" breathed Hap. "I—I better tell Sunshine Sims. Yuh see—"

"No, don't tell him, Hap," interrupted Tombstone. "We've got to find out why that ghost came back. It means somethin'."

"Not to me," declared Hap. "If he lets me alone, I'll let him alone."

SPEEDY wagged his head. "Remember, you drove him to his death, Hap," he reminded Hap.

"Aw, I never! He jumped—he-e-ey! Maybe it was his ghost that jumped through that window!"

"Now yuh're gettin' a idea, Hap," declared Tombstone.

"Well, lovely dove, why was he in this room?" gasped Hap.

"Mebbe he thought you was here," said Speedy hollowly.

"Thought I was—wait a minute!" Hap went over to the door and took hold of the

knob. "I—I think yuh're lyin'—I hope." But he hesitated to open the door.

"All three of us could sleep in this bed, if yuh don't want to go out," Speedy said.

"But, if he came up here again and found yuh—" added Tombstone.

"I'll—be—seein'—yuh," said Hap haltingly, and went quickly into the hallway. A moment later they heard his rapid footsteps on the uncarpeted stairs.

Tears gathered slowly in Tombstone's eyes and rolled down his cheeks, while Speedy wheezed with laughter, slapping both knees with open palms.

"I—I have never seen a man so scared!" gasped Tombstone.

"I only seen it once," husked Speedy. "That one tried to dive out a small window and got stuck half-way."

CHAPTER VI

Another Killing

HAP HAGGERTY met them at the hotel restaurant next morning, as they were eating breakfast. Hap was a little less ghost-minded in the bright light of day than he was in the darkness. He denied being frightened.

"Yuh know," remarked Tombstone, "I'm about to have a idea."

Speedy grinned. "Here we go again. Listen to words of wisdom."

"We'll sleep in Spook McGee's cabin tonight and find out what the ghost wants."

"Wh-what he wants?" queried Hap. "Are you serious?"

"Ghosts can't hurt yuh," replied Tombstone.

"Didn't hurt us," added Speedy. "I'd love it."

"And you will be with us, Hap. It's yore duty as a officer of the law."

"Wh-what has the law got to do with ghosts?" asked Hap. "We deal in flesh and blood. No, sir, you've got the wrong idea. Stay all night in that shack? You boys ain't got no idea how fast I can run."

"The idea is real romantic," said Speedy. "It is educational, too."

"And yuh're crazy," added Hap Haggerty.

Jim Hope came in later and cornered Tombstone on the hotel porch. He had a telegram from Jim Keaton, which he showed to Tombstone. It read:

I AM SORRY TO ADMIT IT. WHAT HAVE THEY DONE NOW.

"I had an idea Keaton would send a man down to help find the killer of Bob Welch, so I wired him, asking him if you were the man," explained Jim Hope. "That is his answer."

"Jim likes his little joke," said Tombstone soberly.

"The question is, are you trying to find the killer of Bob Welch, or the rustlers of my calves?"

"Oh, yeah. Well, Mr. Hope, I dunno which—mebbe both."

"That's fine. What I want to know is this: why did someone cut the brand off that calf?"

"So you wouldn't see it," replied Tombstone. "Do you know Chico Ramos?"

"Of course, I know Chico Ramos. I've bought a lot of calves from Ramos."

"That's what he said."

"When did you see Chico Ramos?"

"Last night. You heard about somebody jumpin' through the window of our hotel room, didn't yuh?"

"Yeah. Sunshine Sims told me."

"That was Ramos. The truth made him jumpy. Yuh see, Mr. Hope, that calf had been hair-branded. In a few weeks—no brand. I'm awful scared that you've been buyin' yore own calves from Chico Ramos."

Jim Hope stared out at the street, his face grim and determined.

"Yuh can't put the deadwood on just anybody, yuh know," said Tombstone. "It wouldn't need to be yore own men. Anybody could do it—even Ramos."

"Much obliged, Tombstone. You don't need to add to it in any way."

"Thank yuh."

Jim Hope went down the street toward the sheriff's office. Tombstone relaxed and rolled a smoke. So Jim Keaton was sorry to admit that he and Speedy were detectives. Well, he'd make Jim Keaton eat that telegram. As far as finding out who killed Bob Welch—maybe the calf thieves had done it. A little later Tombstone saw Jim Hope get on his horse and ride back toward the Bradded H. Speedy and Hap Haggerty came over from the Broadway Saloon and joined Tombstone on the hotel porch.

"Hap still ain't strong for ghosts," remarked Speedy.

"I shore ain't," declared the deputy. "I don't like 'em."

Sunshine Sims came up the street, hurrying just a little.

"What'd you tell Jim Hope about calf-stealin' this mornin', Tombstone?" he asked.

"What'd he say I told him?" countered Tombstone.

"Not too much. But I got to thinkin' it over after he left. My hunch is that he thinks his own outfit have been stealin' Bradded H calves, and he's gone back there alone—lookin' for a showdown."

"Mebbe we better clatter out thataway, in case he bites off too much of a hunk, eh?"

suggested Tombstone.

"Come on," replied the sheriff shortly. "We're goin'."

The group of buildings in the sycamore grove looked peaceful enough, as the four men rode off a low mesa. There was no one in sight around the house, huge stable or the sprawling corrals. The main gate was wide open. To the right of the riders was the big stable and the series of corrals.

"Don't look like anybody—" began Hap Haggerty, but stopped, when Tombstone reined his horse sharply to the right.

There was a splotch of color on the ground by an open corral gate. It was Chico Ramos, sprawled on his back, staring up at the sky through sightless eyes. There was a gun in his right hand.

THE sheriff whirled his horse toward the house. Old Ira Root, the ancient cook of the Bradded H, stumbled onto the kitchen porch, trying to shade his eyes from the sun. He clung with one hand to the side of the doorway, as though unable to see anything.

"What happened, Ira?" asked the sheriff.

"Oh, it's you!" exclaimed the old man. "I can't see anythin'—much. Got my eyes full of sand."

The four men dismounted and went up to him. His face had been cut by flying gravel, and his wet eyes blinked painfully.

"I ain't sure what happened," he said painfully. "Jim Hope came back from town, and I seen him head for the corral, where Tex Eaton and Ames Roche was brandin' calves. I didn't know anythin' was wrong, until I heard shots. I grabbed my old gun and ran out into the yard. Then somebody took a shot at me. I heard it hit the house so I dropped flat. Then I seen Tex come around the corner of the corral, and he took another shot at me. This one hit the dirt in front of me, and I ain't seen much since. I got back into the kitchen and barred the door. Somebody tried to get in.

" 'Never mind that—we've got to get goin'. Roche said. 'Get an extra horse saddled—we're takin' him along. He knows too much.' "

"Who did they mean?" asked the sheriff anxiously.

"I dunno. Mebbe it was Jim Hope. I can't figure it all out, gents."

"Did you know that Chico Ramos is down there by the corral—dead?"

"Chico Ramos? No! I ain't seen him for two-three weeks. Dead, huh?"

"Where's Buck Short?" asked Tombstone.

"He left early this mornin' for Crescent City. Heard that a feller was up there, buyin' horses for the English Gov'ment."

The sheriff, hard-eyed, considered the situation.

"Hap, you hitch up their buckboard team and take Ira to the doctor," he said. "Then bring Doc Clayton back with yuh. Got to have the coroner view the corpse before we move it. I'll stay here."

"It kind of looks as though Eaton and Roche was doin' a job of hair-brandin', when Jim Hope caught 'em," remarked Tombstone. "We'll look at the calves."

There were seven calves in the corral, and all, except one, had been hair-branded. Within a few weeks there would be no sign of a brand, as the hair brand only burns the outer hair and does not sear the skin.

"That's mighty convincin' evidence," declared the sheriff.

"This thing has gone past the evidence stage," said Tombstone.

"But where's Jim Hope? He's gone and his horse is gone. It looks like he downed Chico Ramos."

"Mebbe they took him along with 'em," said Speedy. "After all, they might think Jim Hope was the only one who knowed about the hair-brandin'. Yuh can see why they tried to kill me and Tombstone, Sheriff. They didn't want anybody to see that brand."

"Yeah, it's all plain enough now. But why didn't yuh tell me? We could have taken enough men along to stop this kind of doin's."

"Why didn't Jim Hope tell yuh?" countered Tombstone. "After all, it wasn't our calves."

"That's right."

Hap Haggerty brought the coroner back with him, and after viewing the body, they loaded it in the buckboard, and the sheriff rode with the coroner, leading the sheriff's horse behind the buckboard. Hap stayed back, to ride with Tombstone and Speedy.

"How about goin' up to the Trail End mine?" asked Tombstone.

"Not me," said Hap quickly. "One dead man a day is enough."

"We'd come back before dark."

"Just what in the name of good sense do yuh want to go up there for?" asked Hap.

"I've got me a idea."

"Well, I—shucks, I don't mind foolin' around there in daylight. But you ain't goin' to keep me there after dark. I don't believe in ghosts, yuh understand, but I'm not lettin' anybody prove I'm wrong."

"How many folks did you tell about the ghosts?" asked Tombstone.

"Oh, I dunno," replied the deputy. "I told Sunshine Sims. Buck Short and Jim Hope said it was the biggest lie he ever heard. I kind of felt thataway myself."

"The size of a lie don't amount to so much; it's the quality that counts. But this one happens to be the truth."

"I just hope you don't prove it to me," said Hap. "If there's any one thing I don't care to see, it's ghosts."

HAP criticized Tombstone for leading them astray on the way to Trail End.

"Yuh're takin' us too far up the hill, Tomb-

stone," he said.

"Yeah, I know I am—but I kind of hanker to see what she looks like from above. When yuh're sneakin' up on a ghost, keep above him. Ghosts never look uphill."

"Lovely dove, are we sneakin' up on that ghost?"

"Aw, he's tryin' to scare yuh," laughed Speedy.

"He ain't tryin'. He is!"

Tombstone led them around on a brushy ridge, which took them to a point several hundred feet above the old shaft-house. They dismounted and sat down in the shade of a big manzanita to enjoy a smoke. From that spot they could not see Spook McGee's old shack, as it was in the brush below the old shaft-house.

It was only a little past noon. Tombstone asked Speedy if he'd like to drop down to Spook's cabin and take a snooze on the bunk, but Speedy wasn't interested. Tombstone sprawled on the ground and put his hat over his face.

"I don't see what's the use of stayin' here," complained Hap. "You ain't said why we came up this hill, and after all, I'm a deputy sheriff and—oh-oh!"

Hap Haggerty clawed his gun loose from the holster, but Speedy grasped his wrist. A rattler crawled from a bush six feet away, and seemed undecided which way to go.

"Don't shoot," said Speedy. "No use advertisin' ourselves."

Tombstone sat up, picked up a rock the size of a baseball, and hit the snake square on the head.

Hap saw that the snake was no longer a menace, holstered his gun.

"What do yuh mean—advertisin' ourselves?" he said. "Ghosts ain't scared of shots, are they?"

"Some kinds are," said Tombstone. "We can't take chances."

It was warm up there, and they all snoozed a little. The shadows gradually inched their way into the valley. Hap wanted to start back. Tombstone hunched over his cigarette, studying the side of the hill. Then he spoke.

"You boys stay here while I look things over. I'll be back, after a while."

"You better, or yuh won't find me here," said Hap.

It was almost dark when Tombstone came back. Hap wanted to start for Antelope Wells right away, but Tombstone shook his head.

"Way down there, cached away in a old shack, was four saddled horses," he said.

"Whose horses?" asked Hap and Speedy together.

"I don't know. I moved 'em to a new spot. I'm not very bright, but I've got a hunch that Eaton, Roche and Hope rode three of 'em. Anyway, they're Bradded H horses. Come on now, we're goin' to find out a few things. We'll have to move awful easy."

"You'll go along, won't you, Hap?" asked Speedy.

"Ghosts don't ride horses," replied Hap. "Yeah, I'll go along, but don't get the idea that I ain't scared."

"We are, too," said Tombstone. "Come on."

The long-legged Tombstone led the way down through the brush, past the old shaft-house. It looked like a gibbet against the sky. They reached Spook McGee's old shack, but it was empty. It was quite dark now.

"If we see that blamed ghost, it's a long run uphill to the horses," Speedy whispered.

"If we see a ghost," said Hap, "I ain't stoppin' for no horse."

"They're around here somewhere," whispered Tombstone. "Come on, they may be in one of the old tunnels."

With dire misgivings Speedy and Hap followed Tombstone over a crooked trail in the brush, and they came out at the portal of an old tunnel. Moonlight, streaming over the top of the hill, bathed the timbered portal in a blue light. They went in close, listening.

Somewhere a coyote howled dismally.

"I don't like this, I tell yuh," Hap whispered.

"Listen!" hissed Tombstone.

CHAPTER VII

Showdown Fight

FROM deep in the tunnel came the sound of footsteps, like the boom of a muffled drum. They sank down against some old rocks and timber. The sounds came closer and closer, then stopped. The three men lifted themselves for a view. Standing in the mouth of the tunnel, fair in the moonlight, was Old Spook McGee. He looked just the same as he did last night, putty-like face, matted hair, his clothes muddy.

Hap Haggerty didn't say anything—he just left there, tearing back along the trail in the darkness. Spook McGee didn't even turn his head. Slowly he walked out and seemed to disappear over the edge of the old dump.

"I—I hope yuh're satisfied," whispered Speedy shakily.

"The—the old boy looks natural," said Tombstone. "Where'd Hap go?"

"He didn't leave any—any forwardin' address. I don't mind tellin' yuh that I've had enough ghosts. Even if there ain't no such thing—I've had enough. Listen!"

From somewhere over on that black side-hill there were voices—excited voices—which faded out quickly.

"What was that?" asked Speedy nervously.

"Which direction was the sound from?" asked Tombstone.

"Over there—north, I think."

"Uh-huh. Well, mebbe that was Hap Haggerty passin' through Canada."

"There ain't—ain't nothin' funny about this deal, Tombstone."

"I ain't bein' funny. Keep yore voice down. Where'd that ghost go over the dump?"

"Rur-right out there," whispered Speedy, and added, "And may he never come back."

"Come on and quit shakin'. Ghosts don't make noises when they walk."

"I ain't imitatin' no danged ghost, I'll tell yuh that—uh-h-h-h-h—yuh mean—he ain't no ghost?"

"No more than you are."

Tombstone led the way to the dump, and they slid down to another old trail which weaved around through the brush and brought them out just below Spook McGee's old cabin.

"There's a light!" whispered Speedy. "See it—through the cracks?"

A door banged shut. They moved in a little closer and heard a babel of voices, which ceased quickly. Then a man spoke.

"I'll get the horses. We're leavin' here awful quick."

"If yuh do, yuh'll walk," Tombstone mentally promised the man who had spoken.

The door banged shut again. Tombstone led the way up to the cabin, and they eased around to that broken rear window, which was covered with a blanket. They heard another man speak.

"Tex went to get the horses. We're high-tailin' muy pronto."

"Too bad yuh knocked Hap out. He might have told how come he was up here."

"Where'd yuh find Spook, Buck?"

"Here in the cabin. Spook, you've got to remember where yuh hid that money. Where was it, Spook? Think hard."

"I don't remember. What did I hide, Buck?"

"All that money. Spook, you've got to remember where yuh hid the money."

"We didn't get any money, Buck," whined the old man. "You remember—we didn't get any money."

"Spook, that was years ago. This time we got plenty. Where is it? You must remember hidin' it. This is Buck. You remember Buck."

"Yeah, I remember Buck. Where is he now?"

Buck Short swore bitterly. "For a plugged dime, I'd shoot yore heart out, Spook. I've been askin' him that same question for hours."

"How'd he get away from yuh?" asked one of the men.

"I thought he was asleep, so I went outside to look around. Blast his old hide! Spook, don't yuh remember where yuh hid that money?"

"What'll we do with Hap?"

"Dump him down there with Hope. If they find 'em, all right. Anyway, we'll be gone. Dang it, what now!"

The door banged open and shut, and Tombstone and Speedy heard Tex Eaton's voice.

"The horses—they're gone!"

"No!" exclaimed Buck Short. "Gone? Tex, you must be wrong. Why, who'd take 'em?"

"Wait a minute!" blurted Roche. "No use stampedin'. Mebbe they got loose."

"Yuh know they didn't get loose!" snarled Buck Short. "Somebody took 'em—somebody that was with Hap Haggerty, blast his nosy soul. Roche! Open that trap-door and we'll dump him down with Hope. Wait! I'm goin' to hit him so hard that he won't never bother anybody again!"

"Watch the door!" growled Tex. Then he reached in through the window and tore the blanket away.

OLD Spook McGee was sitting on the bunk, his head in his hands. Near the door was Tex Eaton, his back against the wall. The trap-door was open and Roche had Hap under the arms, almost over the hole. Buck Short had his back to the window, a gun in his right hand, half-lifted, as he measured the distance, intending to smash Hap over the head.

Tombstone's forty-five blasted flame into the dimly-lighted shack, and the bullet hit Buck Short in the right shoulder. The gun jerked out of his hand, and he went to his knees, almost into the trap-doorway. Roche dropped Hap, leaving him half-in, half-out of the cellar.

Tex Eaton snapped a shot from his hip at the window, but the bullet went high and, as Tombstone flipped the hammer again, Roche knocked the lamp off the table, plunging the place into darkness.

The door banged open and Speedy shot twice.

"Why you dirty lobo!" a man yelled.

There was a silence of several moments.

"I reckon that put yore nose in the dirt," Speedy drawled. "How yuh comin', Tombstone?"

"All right, I reckon. One more to account for. Better come out with your hands in the air, Tex. Yuh're all through."

There was no response from Tex Eaton. Tombstone walked around, kicked the door open, but Tex made no move.

"Mebbe I'm a better shot in the dark than I thought I was," said Tombstone.

"There's somebody comin' outside down the path a ways!" exclaimed Speedy. "I heard 'em!"

"That's right—comin' up the trail—and

fast. Watch the door."

It was Sunshine Sims, with a posse of five men. They had heard the shooting.

"Is that a man on the ground over there?" Sims asked.

"Started out to be," replied Speedy. "The shack is more important now."

They took a chance on Tex Eaton and went inside. Tex wasn't in any condition to fight, sprawled against the wall. Buck Short was too badly crippled to do more than curse bitterly, and Hap Haggerty was conscious, staring around at everybody. He had a sizeable lump on his head, and had lost a little blood. But Old Spook McGee just sat there, indifferent to it all.

"Yuh see?" said Tombstone calmly. "We wasn't lyin' about the ghost of Spook McGee."

"I'll say he wasn't," wailed Hap in pained tones. "Gosh, I must have run into some awful live ones."

"How'd you happen to come up here, Sheriff?" asked Tombstone.

"Lookin' for Hap and you fellows. After that ghost yarn, I just figured you might have come back here. But what about Jim Hope?"

"Accordin' to the evidence, he's down in the cellar," said Tombstone. "They was goin' to hit Hap over the head and dump him down there, but I kind of ruined their scheme."

Two of the men dropped into the cellar.

"Where does Buck Short and Spook McGee come in on this deal?"

"Buck was in on the hair-brandin' job, Sheriff," Tombstone said. "Buck and Spook pulled that train robbery near Crescent City, and Spook hid the money. Some way he got out of that flood, but he lost his memory. They was all here, tryin' to make Spook remember where he hid it."

"He's down here, Sims!" yelled one of the men who had gone into the cellar. "He's all right, too!"

They helped Jim Hope out. He had been roped and gagged, but was otherwise unhurt, and conscious. Also very mad.

"Down at the corral," he panted. "I accused 'em of rustlin'. Ramos took a shot at me and missed. I—I think I got Ramos, but one of the others must have hit me with the brandin' iron. I—I could hear everything they said up here. You—you got all of 'em?"

"One outside and two in here," nodded Tombstone. "Yuh buried it in the cellar."

"He-e-ey!" yelled the one man who was still in the cellar. "Take a look at this, will yuh?" He tossed out a canvas sack. "It was buried in the dirt," he said. "In helpin' Hope out, we must have shoved the dirt aside."

"Do yuh remember now, Spook?" asked Tombstone. "Yuh buried it in the cellar."

"Yeah," agreed Spook. "I must have done that."

"I'll be a goslin's grandmother!" gasped Hap. "I just will be. Findin' money!"

"You came awful near bein' a angel's assistant," Speedy reminded him.

"Yeah, I sure did."

"I don't like to ask a detective questions, Tombstone, but how did yuh figure out this end of the deal?" said Jim Hope.

"Detectives?" Sunshine Sims gave a gasp of amazement. "You two?"

"The best that the association ever sent out," said Jim Hope.

"Wait a minute!" exclaimed Tombstone. "Spook, who killed Bob Welch, the detective?"

"Who?" Spook's dirty brow wrinkled in deep thought. "I did."

"You did, Spook?"

"No, I didn't neither—it was Buck. I told him that Welch was a detective. Yeah, Buck killed him. That's right."

UPON hearing this, Tombstone nodded.

"Thanks. I almost forgot to ask. Mr. Hope, you asked how we figured out this end of the deal. Oh, I think it was mebbe eight, nine years ago. I had a argument with a marshal, and got myself into jail. Nothin' serious, just a boyish prank, as yuh might say. Ownership of a horse, as I remember it.

"Anyway, in the next cell was a tough old sidewinder. He knowed I was gettin' loose soon, so he begged me to smuggle out a letter to his pardner. I took it for him and posted it. Then I learned later that he was in for a train robbery—and the name of his partner was Buck Short, Cheyenne, Wyomin'. The old sidewinder was Spook McGee."

"I recalls you," said Spook shakily. "I shore do. I wonder if he ever got the letter? Yuh see, I broke out of the pen, and I ain't never seen him since."

"Don't worry about it, Spook," said Tombstone. "Yuh can't always depend on the mail. I remember one time, down in New Mexico—"

"I'll wire Jim Keaton," interrupted Jim Hope. "He'll want to know. And if yuh're tired of chasin' around for the association, I know a darned good place for a couple good cattlemen."

"Don't mention that in yore wire," said Speedy quickly. "We don't want to worry him."

"Worry him?" queried Hope.

"Yeah, he's always scared we'll quit him and go to punchin' cows."

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COMING IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

TROUBLE TRAILERS IN TOMAHAWK

Another Tombstone and Speedy Novelet by W. C. TUTTLE

GUN TROUBLE

By LE ROY BOYD

When a Dying Rancher Signs Over a Deed to Chad Williams, His Troubles Multiply So Rapidly that the Only Land He Seems to Be Likely to Get Is a Spot for Burial in the Local Boot Hill!

CHAPTER I

Death Sells a Ranch

THE CHINESE dropped a plate. The clatter of the heavy dish as it bounced on the floor was drowned by a healthy Oriental oath. Chad Williams grinned, and turned his head to toss an irreverent remark in the direction of the kitchen. As he lifted his eyes from his supper, he saw the stranger come in the door.

The man cast a worried look behind him, then strode across the room and stopped at Chad's table.

"Yuh're Chad Williams?" he asked. He nodded in answer to his own question and added, "You was pointed out to me."

Chad Williams had only to look at the newcomer to read the marks of a grizzled old cowman. The man's gnarled hands were calloused and scarred by healed rope-burns, and the sun tan of his leathery cheeks was as genuine as the heavy Colt in his holster.

"I'm Tom Harndow—from up at Indian Wells," the man said. "I'm down here to hire some riders. Like a job?"

Chad Williams drew in a long breath that added width to his square-built shoulders. This town on the Border had a lawless reputation, and it was common knowledge that killers could be found here whose guns were for hire.

"Why did you pick out Mustang?" he asked, that thought uppermost in his mind.

"Lookin' for somebody I can depend on."

"If it's a gunslinger yuh want, yuh've got the wrong man," Chad Williams said.

"I know. I've already talked with the law. He told me about you." A slight grin tugged at the corners of Williams' mouth.

"Did Sam Wendell tell yuh I'm just a saddle tramp?" he asked.

There was no criminal record against Williams. That part was clean. He was as free and fiddle footed as any other young ranny out to see the world.

The twitching of a muscle high on Harndow's cheek told Williams the old marshal had obviously been truthful.

"He said yuh're a good kid."

A suddenly generated warmth stole from Williams' neck around to his jaw.

"I'm no angel, Mister," he growled defensively, and picked up his knife and fork and went to work again on his steak.

"I'm not lookin' for angels," Harndow grunted. "I want men that Watt Lawson can't hire away from me, or run out of the country."

Chad Williams paused in the act of lifting a bite, and laid his fork down on his plate. He shot a quick glance at the two riders who had just come into the restaurant. He looked at Harndow.

Harndow started to his feet, and in his hurry knocked over the chair. He was clawing his Colt from the leather when the first gun-explosion filled the small room.

Williams' first thought was that this was no fight of his. Yet the two hombres had jumped the old man without seeming excuse!

"Say, now—"

Williams' protest was punctuated by lead smashing into his plate. He heard somebody cough, and saw that Harndow had been hit.

The Chinese came running from the kitchen, waving a meat cleaver. A bullet smacked against the cleaver, hammered the steel against the Oriental's chest, and he peaceably sat down.

ANOTHER bullet jerked at Williams' belt, and he knew then he no longer had time for philosophical hair-splitting. He'd been dealt a hand in this battle.

He snaked his gun from the holster. He planted one in the center of the target, and the hombre on the right jackknifed as if he'd been kicked in the stomach by a bronc.

Harndow's Colt was talking once more. The second of the gunmen crumpled and lay still.

The bullet ripped through the muscles above Chad's elbow

Williams pushed fresh cartridges into his gun, glanced at the Chinese and saw he wasn't hurt much. He stepped around the table to where Harndow was trying to prop himself up.

A crimson flood pushed between the fingers Harndow clamped against his side, but he gave Chad Williams a grateful smile.

"Guess you are handy with yore smokepole, son."

Williams got a hold under the rancher's arms and helped him to a chair.

"I'll see if I can find a doctor," he said.

"No time for that." Harndow nodded at the two gunmen on the floor. "We got to get out of here. Them was Spike Owens and Dirty-Shirt Malloy."

"They won't bother us any more."

"They're Watt Lawson's men. There may be others close by."

The Chinese recovered sufficiently to get to his feet. He raised a yell and stumbled out the front door. Harndow struggled to his feet.

"We'll have to hurry," he gasped. "If yuh know a place where we could hole up for a while—"

Chad Williams glanced in the direction the Chinese had gone. Before long the Oriental would have a mob there.

"Out the back way," he said.

He led Harndow through the kitchen. In the alley, he turned left through the dark until he had almost reached the side street. He left Harndow there, and hurried to the livery stable for his horse.

When he returned, he roused Harndow to consciousness and got him into the saddle. As he swung up behind him, light poured from the swung-open back door of the restaurant. Williams dug his heels in the mustang's flanks.

A mile from town, he came to Pedro Martinez' 'dobe shack. The barking of a dog brought the Mexican to the door.

Pedro recognized Chad Williams.

"Que pasa?" he asked. "What's wrong?"

"Help me get him inside," Chad said. "He's hurt—bad."

Together they carried Harndow into the shack and laid him on a bed. Pedro's wife, Rosa, opened the old rancher's shirt to examine his wounds.

"Agua caliente," Rosa snapped at Pedro. "Pronto!"

Her jabbering brought Harndow awake. He fastened his gaze on Williams.

"I'm done for," he said. "No use kidding ourselves, son. I'm on my way out. But Watt Lawson hasn't grabbed onto the Circle Eight yet. I can still beat him. Get me a pencil and paper."

Rosa looked at Chad Williams.

"Let him have what he wants," Williams said.

She went to the cupboard, and returned with a cheap writing tablet. She placed a pencil in Tom Harndow's hand.

He wrote, the effort cutting his breath shorter and shorter, and when he was done he called Pedro and Rosa to sign the sheet. He gave the paper to Williams.

"That's a deed to the Circle Eight—made out to you," he said. "And there's one thing more—"

The sentence trailed into a sigh, and he was never able to finish it.

"Muerto," Rosa muttered soberly. The rancher was dead, murdered. Pedro crossed himself.

Williams became aware of the paper in his hand. He moved over to the light and read it. It might be, of course, that the Circle Eight was only a one-horse spread, and again . . . A furrow appeared in his brow as he folded the sheet carefully and put it in a pocket.

He walked to the door, stepped outside and looked up at the cold bright stars. That battle in the restaurant had been no affair of his, yet because he had helped an old man, who a few minutes before had been a stranger to him, he now had a deed to a ranch in his pocket.

A cool breeze swept in from the northeast and washed over him. He turned his gaze in the direction from which it had come, and found he was looking toward Indian Wells.

CHAPTER II

An Unexpected Saddlemate

FOR a cowboy, a saloon was an information bureau, so when Chad Williams rode into Indian Wells about three o'clock that afternoon, he pulled up before the Dobe Dollar. He let his gaze go up and down the shabby street, and so far as he could see it was no different from that of any other cowtown.

Inside, he leaned against the polished mahogany of the bar.

Charley, the big fat bartender, finished with a group of Watt Lawson's Slash L riders at the far end of the room and waddled over.

"What'll it be?"

"How about a beer?" Chad Williams asked.

Charley drew the drink. Williams twisted the glass to form a wet circle on the magogany.

"Can yuh tell me where I could find Tom Harndow's ranch?" he asked, idly.

Limpy, the crooked-legged swamper, halted the ineffectual swishing of his broom. Enough stillness came into the room so that the buzzing of a fly could be heard.

"About ten miles out northwest of town," Charley answered.

Williams drank his beer and tossed a quarter toward Charley. He swung around and walked out, giving the impression he was unaware of the stir he had created.

He halted on the other side of the swinging doors, rolled and lit a cigarette. He saw that a block to the south was the bank, and when he had finished his smoke, he made for the place.

He entered the building and stepped to the grilled window. The teller was so short, he had to stand on a box to do business. He raised his mutton-chop-whiskered face from counting coins.

"Yes?" he intoned.

Chad Williams didn't answer. He had caught sight of a gilt-letter sign on a door: HENRY JOHNSON, PRESIDENT. He walked to the door and entered without knocking.

Henry Johnson was at his desk, and when Williams came in he looked up with placidity.

"Mr. Johnson?" Without an invitation, Chad pulled up a chair and sat down. "My name's Chad Williams."

Henry Johnson was a tall, thin individual with a head that sloped toward the top. He brought the tips of his fingers together.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

"I'd like to get some information about Tom Harndow's Circle Eight."

The banker's forehead puckered with a thought.

"What kind of information?"

"How large a place is it?"

The corners of Henry Johnson's thin lips curved slightly into a smile.

"Thinking of buying it?"

"Might say that—yes."

"Well—" Henry Johnson rested his elbows on the arms of his chair. "He holds a section on a patent, with a mile of Wild Horse Creek. Then there's grazing rights on about ten thousand acres more."

Chad Williams pulled at his lower lip. No wonder Harndow had been ready to fight for the place!

"Many cows carry his brand?"

"Eight hundred—more or less."

CHAD'S gaze went to the window and passed to a half dozen mustangs tied to a hitch-rail in the side street. Now that he thought of it—he'd seen all of this little old world he wanted to. He was ready to settle down, and he had the means for that right here in his pocket.

"I happen to know that if Tom Harndow sells, he'll have to have cash," Henry Johnson said. "Fact is—the bank holds a mortgage on that ranch. Comes due in a month."

"How much is it?"

"Five thousand." The banker acted as if his smile had begun to hurt him. "Tom's been gone for a couple of weeks, but if you're really interested, you might see his daughter."

"Daughter?" Williams felt his head involuntarily jerk.

"Anne. Yuh see—Tom's been having some tough luck lately, and she's staying with Mrs. Carey, four blocks up the street here. Says she's going to learn dressmaking."

Chad Williams got to his feet. A tremor ran down into his fingers.

"If there's anything more I can do for you—" the banker said. "Stop 'round any time."

When Williams reached the sidewalk, he halted. His look was drawn up the street, in the direction Henry Johnson had indicated he would find Mrs. Carey's house. Tom Harndow had died before he could tell about having a daughter. Williams had determined, on his way up here that if that ranch was worth anything at all, he would have it, but now that a woman was involved, it complicated his plans.

He supposed he'd go see her.

It was going on eight o'clock when he finally knocked at the door of the little frame house. In the meantime, he had taken his bronc to the livery, gotten himself a room at the hotel, and had his supper.

Mrs. Carey came to the door. She was a short, chubby woman.

"Miss Harndow live here?" Chad asked.

Mrs. Carey gave the impression of trying to add a couple inches to her stature.

"If you're one of Watt Lawson's men—" she began.

"It's about her father."

MRS. CAREY'S gathering hostility vanished. She stepped aside.

"Come in," she said. She walked over and lit a globe lamp on a parlor table by a window. "You can wait in here."

She went out, and her footsteps receded toward the rear of the house.

She hadn't offered him a chair, and Williams remained standing. It was quiet there, and the stillness pressed about him. The girl appeared suddenly in the doorway that led from the back. Deep blue, anxious eyes confronted Chad.

"Miss Harndow?" Chad Williams said it as if he couldn't quite believe it were old Tom's daughter. In his mind he had formed a homely picture of her.

She nodded her brushed, blonde head in answer to his inquiry.

"I'm Chad Williams," he said.

"Mrs. Carey said you'd brought word about Dad. Won't you sit down?" She made a gesture toward a chair. She moved across the room and settled in a rocker.

Williams knew she was waiting for him to speak. He twisted his hat in his hands.

"Don't know how to say it," be began finally. "But the truth is—yore father won't be comin' home!"

"So Lawson's men got him!"

The anguish of her cry struck him with the force of a blow. He had expected tears, but

her face was cold, finely chiseled marble.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She couldn't have been more than nineteen, yet the strain of uncertainty under which she plainly had been living had added maturity to her years.

She tossed back her hair with an attempt at resolution, but she was tired, worn thin, emotionally dry.

"I shouldn't have said that about Mr. Lawson—I spoke before I thought." Her voice became quieter. "Tell me about it."

"It was down there at Mustang. I was eatin' supper when yore dad came into the restaurant."

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Mrs. Carey had returned to the room. There was an air of belligerency about her that wasn't far from disbelief, as he told his story through.

"If you want to know what I think," Mrs. Carey said, once when Chad paused, "it was some of that Slash L outfit."

Anne Harndow remained silent.

"I found a padre to say the prayers for yore father," Williams went on. "We buried him at the foot of a big cottonwood."

Still Anne didn't cry. She sat in the rocker, stony-faced, her slender hands folded in her lap.

Chad Williams rose. He glanced at Mrs. Carey and then at Anne.

"I'd better be going now," he said.

He left them, and outside he walked back again toward the center of town.

And as he walked his elbow pushed against the paper he carried in the money-belt under his shirt.

He hadn't told Anne Harndow that her father had given him a deed to the ranch!

CHAPTER III

Whipsawed

NEXT morning after breakfast, Chad Williams saddled his mustang and rode out to look over the Circle Eight.

His first view of it came when he topped a low ridge overlooking Wild Horse Creek. A mile to the west were the buildings, a log cabin, barn and sheds, and fattening corrals. To the south, irrigated from a small dammed creek, was a large patch of alfalfa and some corn.

Williams put his bronc down the slope, crossed the bridge over the creek, and pulled up before the cabin. Four broncs were in the yard, the Slash L brand on their left shoulders. On the veranda was a man, smoking a cigar and watching him.

Chad dismounted and went up on the porch. He passed a quick scrutiny over the man.

"You're Watt Lawson?" he hazarded the guess.

"That's right."

"I'm Chad Williams—the new owner of this place."

Lawson's heavy black eyebrows drew close together. He was a big man and, plainly, the type of a fighter who made his own rules.

"The devil yuh say!" he barked.

Chad glanced at the door where another man had appeared. Two more men were coming from the barn. This last pair halted at the foot of the steps, and the prickling instinct of danger tensed Williams' spine.

Lawson let a chuckle roll from his throat.

"Meet the boys." He made a motion with his hand at the hombre in the door. "Jim Farnsworth. And down there—Buck Alson and Tap Ransdale."

"What's he want?" Farnsworth asked.

"Says he owns the Circle Eight." Lawson's gaze was like steel stabbing at Chad. "It'll take more than just say-so to back up that claim!"

"I've got it!"

Lawson's jaws clamped down on his cigar.

"We'll see if it's better than what I have. I've been dickerin' a long time with Tom Harndow for this place and no saddle stiff's goin' to come in now and take it away from me."

Lawson had the advantage—Chad Williams knew that. He had taken possession of the ranch, and he gave no doubt he would fight to keep it. He thought of going for his gun, to settle the question there and then. Calmer reason, however, told him there could be but one conclusion to such a one-sided set-up.

"Shall I let him have it?" Farnsworth growled.

"No," Lawson snapped. "Not yet." His eyes took hold of Chad like a pair of hooks. "I'm going to let yuh off easy, Williams. Get on that bronc of yores and fan. I'm givin' yuh till sundown. Understand?"

"I don't run easy, Lawson."

"Anyway yuh want to play it—is all right with me."

CHAD WILLIAMS sent another glance at Farnsworth. The hombre was ready to throw his gun. Chad switched his look to Buck and Tap, and saw they were waiting only for a signal from their boss to go into action.

"Okay, Lawson," Williams said. "Be seein' yuh later."

He walked out to his horse. He bunched the muscles of his back for the slug he half-expected. Nothing happened, though, and he climbed into the saddle and headed for Indian Wells. Reaching town, he rode to the

courthouse. There were other ways of fighting besides with guns. He went into the courthouse and to the clerk's office. From his belt he drew the deed. "I want to record this," he said.

The county clerk, in shirt-sleeves and bright red galluses, examined the paper closely.

"This ain't a regular deed," he said sourly.

"Just the same—it's good."

The clerk nodded without enthusiasm and pulled the reception book toward him.

"That'll be a dollar and a quarter."

Williams put the money on the counter. That done he went out and looked up the sheriff.

Roy Blake was a veteran, and three walls of his small office in the jail were papered with dodgers of wanted men. He was reading a new dodger that had just come in the mail when Chad Williams entered.

He gave Chad a glance over the rims of his spectacles.

"I want to see you," Williams said. "On business."

On invitation, Chad took a chair. He hunched forward, and while he rolled a cigarette, he scanned the fourth wall of the office which was composed of the iron bars of two cells.

"I just left a deed to Tom Harndow's Circle Eight over to the courthouse to be recorded," he said.

The sheriff gave him a long, searching scrutiny.

"That deed," Chad Williams said. "Harndow gave it to me legal and proper enough—if that's what yuh're wonderin' about. But Watt Lawson is on the place now. I want to get him off."

"Can't just tell a man to vamose," the sheriff said. "I'd have to have a court order." He lit his pipe and shook the flame off the match. "Yuh might talk with Lee Roberts."

A hint of doubt was evident in the laconic way the sheriff rolled the tip of his tongue around the inside of his right cheek.

"Who is Roberts?" Chad Williams asked.

"Roberts is the district attorney," the sheriff said slowly. "But it also just happens that he works for Watt Lawson too."

An angry warmth formed at the base of Chad's neck, reached around to his ears and ran into his jaws.

He understood now the sheriff would take no hand in the fight between him and Lawson.

"See what I can do," he grunted. "Thanks."

He made his way outside, halted beneath a large cottonwood in front of the building. He wanted to get things in hand before he went off half cocked.

But he wasn't going to see Lee Roberts. The hombre was Lawson's man and would laugh at him.

He tossed his cigarette butt into the street and started back toward town.

CHAPTER IV

Killing Job

CHAD WILLIAMS stood by the window of his room and stared at the scene below him. The big fiery orb of the sun was sinking below the horizon.

In a few minutes he would have to go down there and serve notice that he wasn't afraid of Watt Lawson or all the gunslingers the hombre had on his payroll. If he didn't, he might just as well say good-by to that ranch and ride on to hunt for another punching job at thirty a month. It had been made clear to him that afternoon that the sheriff would take no hand in the fight between him and Lawson. He heard a knock at his door and tensed. He was about to answer when Limpy, the swamper at the Dobe Dollar, slid into the room.

Limpy closed the door, leaned against it.

"I come to tell yuh Anne wants to see yuh," he said.

"Anne?" Chad picked up his hat off the foot of the bed. "Where is she?"

"Just a minute!" The tone of Limpy's voice caught Chad Williams up short. He saw now that a gun was tucked in the belt under the swamper's coat.

"Ever since yuh went to see Anne last night, she's been cryin'," Limpy said. His Adam's apple worked up and down. "What did yuh do to her?"

"I went to tell her about her dad," Williams said. "Tom Harndow is dead."

If Limpy had heard it before, it took a little while now to get the idea fixed in his brain again. Then he squared his shoulders.

"You hurt that girl, and I'll kill yuh!"

"You crazy, man? I wouldn't want to hurt her."

"Anne's been good to me." Limpy shuffled to get his weight off his crooked leg. "Mrs. Carey let me fix up a room in her barn, and when I was sick, Anne looked after me."

"Anne's my friend, too," Williams insisted. "Give me a chance and I'll prove it."

He got Limpy out of the room and down the stairs. In the lobby the bank teller was standing at the hotel clerk's desk and, as Chad passed, he reached and plucked at his sleeve.

"Could I see you a second?"

Williams stopped, recognizing the gnome-like face framed by the mutton chop whiskers.

"Let's go over here where we can be alone," the teller said.

"Wait for me," Williams said to Limpy. "I won't be long."

He walked with the teller to a corner of the lobby.

"I'm George Evans," the man began, in a voice so low that the clerk and Limpy couldn't hear.

"Yeah, I saw yuh at the bank yesterday."

"Don't know how to say it." The little fellow's eyes faltered behind the thick lenses of his glasses. "It's about that Circle Eight and that note. Suppose you get the ranch. How do you figure to pay off the mortgage? It comes due in a month."

CHAD WILLIAMS felt there was something more here than just business.

"Couldn't a man round up some cows and sell them?" he said, tentatively. "And if he needed a few extra days, the bank wouldn't crowd him long's the money was in sight, would they?"

"Henry Johnson wouldn't—no!"

"Okay." Williams' eyes held steadily on Evans. "So what's the deal?"

"Thought you might like to know. Watt Lawson took up that note this afternoon. He got Johnson over a barrel—threatened to draw all his money out of the bank—and made Johnson assign that mortgage to him."

Chad Williams considered, carefully. Watt Lawson had countered his move. He'd thought he was being smart in recording that deed, but even though he had legally put the ranch in his name, all Lawson had to do was see he failed to meet the note when it came due, and then foreclose on him!

"Why are yuh tellin' me this?" Chad Williams asked in sudden curiosity.

"Why—I like to see—what's right," George Evans stammered. "But one man alone can't buck Watt Lawson—he's too big. My advice would be for you to leave the country."

"Lawson send yuh to tell me that?"

"It's just—" Evans paused, pulled himself up to all of his five feet four in height. "This is the way of it," he said. "Watt Lawson offered Tom Harndow two thousand dollars cash for his equity. Now that Tom is dead, that money belongs to Anne. Since you've come—Anne may not even get that two thousand. I don't like to see her beat out of it!"

A little triphammer set up a furious pounding at the back of Chad Williams' mind. He could see the conclusion to which Evans' reasoning would lead, and he didn't want to face the fact that maybe this town expected him to fight the battle against Lawson—for Anne's benefit.

But he wasn't an altruistic gent, he told himself. He was just a young cowpoke wanting to get ahead in the world.

He swung around, left Evans, and strode across the lobby. The swamper was waiting for him.

Limpy followed Williams outside, and together they walked to the little frame cottage in the north part of town. When they reached the gate, Limpy said he wouldn't go in, and Chad went to the door alone.

Anne answered his knock this time. She led him into the parlor, invited him to take a chair, and he saw she had prepared cakes and tea. It was to be a social call after all.

HE REMAINED silent while she poured him a cup. He held the fragile china gingerly, and when he had drunk the tea he put the cup and saucer on the stand table.

She had gone to the rocker where she had sat last night, and the globe lamp cast its light on her blond hair. She wore a black dress now, but other than that she showed no new evidence of her grief.

Mrs. Carey appeared from the kitchen, stood in the doorway with her arms folded across her big bosom. Williams wished she would allow them to be alone, but she seemed determined to stay.

"Limpy said you wanted to see me," he said. "Is it about the ranch?" He wondered what had caused him to ask that. It was like a fighter throwing himself wide open. "I was out there today," he added.

Her restraint broke at last.

"Dad would have made the Circle Eight the finest ranch in the country, if he had had time," she declared. "But he couldn't get the help to drive his cattle to market."

"So consequently he couldn't meet the note that was coming due?" Williams nodded. "That's when I ran into him. When he came to Mustang, looking for hands."

Chad Williams didn't pursue that line any further. He watched Anne closely to see what effect his next words would have on her.

"Watt Lawson was out at the ranch. It looked like he had moved in on the place. And I saw Jim Farnsworth, too."

"Mr. Lawson planned to put Farnsworth on the ranch, if dad sold to him." A sudden glint came in her eyes. And then she put it to Chad bluntly. "Didn't you tell me you own the Circle Eight now?"

The sharp, involuntary breath Chad Williams drew into his lungs got in the way of what he wanted to say. Now he understood her motive in asking him to come. And like a fool he'd walked into her trap!

"You don't need to explain," she said when he awkwardly began to mumble something.

Her eyes were on him, steady, and probing his thoughts, and he let his anger rise to cover his confusion. He picked up his hat from the floor beside the chair and got to his feet.

She had beaten him, and he didn't know of any way he could answer her implication that he had practically stolen the ranch. All that remained to him that he could see, was to make as honorable a retreat as he could manage.

"I'd better go," he said. "Got to meet a

fellow down town."

He was thankful she didn't bother to say anything further.

When he stepped outside, he found that night had spread its darkness. Limpy met him at the gate.

"They're waiting for yuh," Limpy said.

Chad Williams now tested the looseness of the Colt in his holster, and flexed his fingers. He shot a glance in the direction of the Dobe Dollar.

"Remember this, boy," Limpy said. "Alson is Lawson's number one gun. Almost as fast as Jim Farnsworth."

"I'll remember that," Williams said. The promise of action cleared his brain. His resolution became hard. "Thanks, Limpy—a lot."

He settled his hat firmly on his head, and started for town.

CHAPTER V

Wanted for Murder

WHEN Buck Alson emerged from a group in front of the pool hall and stepped in his way, Chad Williams knew that gunman was the one who'd been selected to send him to Boot Hill.

He slowed to a stop. Ten paces separated them.

"Thought the boss told yuh to beat it?" Buck Alson went into the old familiar stance.

"But I'm still here!"

Alson was no talker. He was a killer. Watt Lawson had hired him. Now was the time that he earned his pay.

His hand swept down with a sinuous striking motion. His gun leaped into his palm.

Chad's tense muscles were ready. The killer's gleam that flashed in Buck's eyes had warned him. He matched Buck's speed.

The twin roars of guns blended. The thunderclap rocketed from the false fronts.

The blow that smashed into Buck's chest lifted him to his toes. The life ran out of him, and with a final spasmodic jerk he fell into a heap, dead.

Chad Williams swung a hard, cold gaze at the loafers standing in front of the pool hall. They were a sober outfit now, and no one offered to take up where Buck had failed.

A movement to his left drew Williams' attention. He saw Tap Ransdale riding off, and guessed the owlhooter had gone to report to his boss.

Chad Williams dropped his gun back in the leather, stepped past Buck's body, and made his way unhindered to the saloon.

Charley, the cherry red of his face diluted by a touch of paleness, greeted him.

"What'll it be?" he asked.

"A double shot of whiskey," Williams said.

With his thumb and forefinger Chad Williams twisted the glass Charley put before him, making a small wet ring on the smooth surface of the mahogany. His look riveted on the mirror, and after a bit he saw Limpy coming in the rear door. He lifted his drink and drained the amber-colored liquor.

He set the glass down and filled it again. If Williams' mind hadn't been occupied with the question as to when and how Watt Lawson would try again to give him a one-way ticket, he wouldn't have been caught off guard. As it was, about a quarter of an hour later, he felt the hard muzzle of a Colt rammed into his ribs.

"I'll have that gun, bub!" a voice cracked.

CHAD WILLIAMS stiffened. He stood motionless for the second it took him to grasp the fact somebody had got the drop on him and a hand reached and lifted his weapon.

He turned slowly to meet the determined gaze of Roy Blake.

"What's the idea, Sheriff?" he asked.

The sheriff wasn't ready to talk, apparently, and he didn't answer. He moved his head toward the street.

"You comin' peaceful?"

Chad Williams didn't want to buck the law. Anyway, there certainly was someone who had been in that crowd in front of the pool hall who would tell how it was, and he'd clear himself.

"Okay," he said. "Let's go."

At the jail, Roy Blake opened a door to one of the two cells whose bars formed one side of his office, and gestured Chad inside. The metallic grate of the key as the sheriff turned the lock suddenly fanned Williams' resentment.

"Alson jumped me," he said. "Ask anybody who saw that shootin'."

"Mebbe so, bub—I'll find out about that later. But this is about something else. I got a warrant for yuh."

"What for?"

"For murder. For killing Tom Harndow."

Blake walked over to his desk. He put Chad's gun and cartridge-belt in a drawer and pushed a paper in a pigeonhole. He got out his pipe, filled it.

"Sheriff." Williams held two of the bars in his hands. "Tell me. Who made out that warrant?"

"Roberts—the district attorney."

Some person had to swear out the warrant, though. Make the charge.

"So Watt Lawson ain't losin' time—huh?" Chad said. "If Buck Alson falls down on the job of sendin' me to my grave he'll get Roy Blake after me!"

Blake lit his pipe. He appeared about to say something and then decided against it. He sat down and lifted his feet to his desk.

Chad Williams sensed the hopelessness of

his situation. Watt Lawson was smart all right, and crafty as a red fox. What if Williams did eventually clear himself of the charge of murdering Harndow? They could drag out the processes of the courts until after that mortgage on the Circle Eight came due and Lawson had foreclosed to get title to the ranch.

Williams moved backward, and settled down on the bunk. After a while he stretched out and closed his eyes to see if he could figure out some means of countering Lawson's strategy.

HE MUST have dozed off into a half sleep, for some time later he awoke suddenly to full consciousness.

For a little bit he lay still, staring up at the ceiling while he tried to analyze the cold feeling that drenched him like ice water. He sat up and swung his feet to the floor. The sheriff, he saw, had an extra six-shooter near his left elbow, and leaning against the desk was a sawed-off shotgun.

Chad Williams was able then to define his uneasiness. It was an intuition of danger, and the weapons the sheriff had placed close to hand confirmed his suspicions. The sheriff was expecting trouble here at the jail!

It didn't take much reasoning to figure out what had happened. Watt Lawson had determined to get rid of him and this time he wasn't giving the assignment to any single person, such as Buck Alson, who had failed at the job. He was getting his pack together.

Williams pulled himself erect. He gripped the bars so tightly that his knuckles drained white.

"What's up, sheriff?" he asked.

Blake slowly removed the pipe from his mouth. He turned and regarded Williams for a moment.

"Nothing," he said.

"With all that hardware around?" Williams shook his head. "We're going to have one mess of visitors before long, and they're not coming to pay any social call!"

Williams paused, and drew in a deep breath.

"Look, sheriff, I didn't kill Tom Harndow, and with any chance at all, I'll prove it. But if a mob is on the way here to string me up—let me face them with a gun in my hand."

"Who said anythin' about a mob?" Roy Blake growled.

It was plainly useless to argue. Roy Blake would fight to protect a prisoner, but he wasn't the kind to give one a weapon.

Chad Williams turned and walked to the other end of the cell and looked at the window. If he so much as tried to open the sash to get at the bars over the opening, he'd attract the sheriff.

While he stood there, he heard the sheriff get up and stomp across the office. Blake had locked the office's outer door, and in the stillness the click of the key was loud. Someone came in.

"Could I see Chad Williams?" a woman said.

"He's in there, Anne." The sheriff pulled out his watch. "But it's gettin' late, so don't stay long. I'll be right outside."

Williams glanced at the sheriff moving out the door, and then swung his eyes to Anne.

She came forward slowly, and halted a few feet from the bars. Her hand nervously fumbled at the throat of her dress. She said nothing, only stared at him.

From out in the street came a sound like a sack of salt being dropped to the floor. Anne half turned. At that moment, Limpy stuck his head in the door.

"I need some help," he said.

CHAPTER VI

Spied On

SHE hurried out, and when she returned she was h e l p i n g Limpy carry in the limp form of the sheriff. They put him on his chair and with a lariat Limpy bound him.

"He's going to have a h e a d a c h e," L i m p y grunted with no little satisfaction. "But he'll be all right — after a while."

Anne searched around the desk and found the keys, crossed the room and opened Williams' cell.

Chad hurried out. He pulled open the desk drawer and got his Colt. He buckled on the belt. He looked at Limpy.

"Jim Farnsworth's raising the town," the old swamper answered Chad's unasked question. "And Watt Lawson's paying for the liquor to get 'em fired up. But me and Anne know where yuh can hide out."

Anne blew out the lamp.

"Come on," she said, urgently. "Hurry."

A few rods south and east of the jail was an old warehouse. On the far side of it, in the shadows, three saddled mustangs waited.

"Let Limpy have your horse, Chad," Anne said. "That way we'll stand a chance to throw the sheriff off. You take my horse."

She, herself, swung up on a third bronc, a nag from the livery stable, and tightened up the reins.

"What about you?" Chad asked. "Where are you goin'?"

"I'm taking you to the hideout."

"You can't. There's liable to be some shootin'."

"What if there is?" Her glance traveled through the dark to the swamper. "You know what to do?"

Limpy's voice quavered like a plucked

guitar string.

"Do everything yuh said, and get back soon's I can," he answered.

Limpy slapped the bronc with the ends of the reins. He put the animal into a gallop, and the darkness of night fell behind him.

"If you're ready," Anne said to Williams. "We'd better go."

He stifled his misgivings. He climbed into the saddle.

"Okay," he said, reluctantly.

But as they rode from town, they were unaware that Tap Ransdale, in making an excursion to the jail to scout what preparations the sheriff had made to receive the mob, had witnessed the break. . . .

ANNE HARNDOW led Chad Williams out of town to the south, then swung to the right. After a while, the moon came up, a quarter slab of silver pie, and Williams could make out the gray outlines of her shoulders ahead of him.

They rode for eighteen miles to the west, put their broncs across Wild Horse Creek, and plunged into the rough country off the Greenhorn mountain range.

Anne picked up a trail and followed it into a wide gulch. She drew close to the cliffs, and when the wall turned to the north she stopped and dismounted.

"This way," she said. She walked up a slope, and came finally to the opening of a cave.

"It's big enough in there for your horse," she said. "Better get him out of sight."

He took the animal inside, and without unsaddling he returned to where she stood.

"We didn't have time tonight," she said, "but tomorrow after dark I'll bring you some supplies. You needn't worry. This place is on the Circle Eight."

The way she told him that sent a coldness through him.

"Why did yuh bring me here?" he said. "You could have let Watt Lawson and his mob take care of me there at the jail. From what that bank teller, George Evans, said it would mean the difference between yore gettin' or not gettin' the Circle Eight."

She lifted her head quickly, and he sensed her pride.

"That isn't the way dad would have wanted it," she said, fiercely.

She picked up the reins of her old livery stable nag.

"Don't leave," she said. "I'll be back tomorrow night."

When she had gone, Chad Williams' thoughts were as mixed up as the scrambled pieces of a puzzle. He walked to a small boulder, sat down and tried to get them into some kind of order. Before he knew it, the moon had climbed to the zenith of the black sky. He rolled a cigarette. As he struck a match to light it, a bullet whipped past his ear. The zip of the bullet was followed by the report of a gun down below. He doused the flame and threw himself on the sheltered side of a boulder. He pulled his gun now, and crawfished to the cave. He pressed close to the wall behind a jagged outjutting of rock. Then, he saw the black blob of a man's head and shoulders. He sent a bullet at it, and the shadow dropped.

The flash of his weapon had hardly died when from in front and to the right came a fusillade that put a hail of lead into the mouth of the cave.

Chad Williams crouched to his knees, and the barrel of his gun grew hot.

After that first burst of fire came a few minutes of quiet. Williams now had time to think, and he came to the conclusion that Sheriff Roy Blake had regained consciousness and had come after him with a posse.

But how had they found him?

He tried to put away the thought that was hammering at his brain, and yet the only answer obvious to his question was that it had been through Anne. Yet it was incredible that she had led him into a trap!

"Better come out, Williams—with yore hands grabbin' for a cloud!" One of the besiegers called up to him.

He hurled his defiance at them.

"Come and get me!"

A RIFLE whanged away, and Chad knew the odds against him were growing. They could stand off, out of range of his short gun and, come daylight, kill him with no danger to themselves.

He began to pull rocks in front of him to make a rampart. Then he stopped abruptly.

That had been Farnsworth who had yelled at him. Not the sheriff! That wasn't Roy Blake down there! These were Watt Lawson's men, and their job was to wipe out a fool saddle tramp who had dared threaten Lawson's dream of empire.

Chad Williams wiped perspiration away with a swipe of his shirt sleeve. He saw a movement below him. He sent a hunk of lead at it, and a screech lifted above the roar of his gun. Again, the fury of the battle swelled to a crescendo. William's horse neighed its terror and threatened to bolt.

Before the racket had ebbed once more into silence, Chad Williams crawled back to the bronc in the rear of the cave. As quietly as he could, he led the animal toward the apron ledge before the opening, stopped him still within the cavern's darkness.

He slapped the mustang on the rump, and as the horse plunged out of the cave and down the slope, he dragged himself into the saddle, bent low.

In front of him, a man rose to his feet,—six-gun leveling. A second gun blasted away. Those slugs went wide of their mark as the mustang stumbled, but didn't go down.

The attacker with the rifle let out a Co-

manche yell and blazed away again. The bullet ripped through the muscles just above Williams' elbow, plowed across his ribs, and winged its way into the night.

Chad Williams, however, was down now to the bottom of the gulch. He got a firm seat in the saddle,—raked his heels and gave the mustang its head. He knew the gunmen would be coming after him just as soon as they could get their horses. But darkness covered his trail before them.

By the time the sun rose, he was deep into the mountains. Eventually, he came to a small stream and put his horse up the talus of a hill to find cover in a stand of pine.

He dismounted, while pain reached up to squeeze the air from his lungs. He held to the saddle for support until the dizziness had passed, then got the makings for a cigarette. This smoke eased the fire in his arm.

Once more, he thought of Anne Harndow and how she had, apparently, led him into the trap where Watt Lawson's men could find him. Then an impenetrable darkness settled on him. . . .

CHAPTER VII

Underdog

A COOL night breeze finally brough Chad Williams awake. He lifted himself to his right elbow. His wound was like a hot poker pressing against his ribs. He wanted to smoke, but he had no tobacco left.

Time was running out when that mortage on the Circle Eight would be due. He had slept, and that meant one day less for his purpose. Further, he remembered, if Lawson could keep him cooped up in these hills until he had foreclosed on the ranch, the man would have gained his objective as surely as if he had killed him last night.

Williams got to his feet. He was weak. Yet he could still ride. He caught up his horse.

He headed south, getting his bearings from the stars. The thought struck him he had only to keep going that way, and he would reach Mustang, where there'd be no Lawson gunmen seeking to blast out his life. But he kept his bronc pointed toward Indian Wells.

He arrived in Indian Wells at two o'clock in the morning. He saw the dim silhouette of the town under the high moon and caution warned him that if any of Lawson's outfit happened to see a person riding in from the west, he'd likely investigate. In order to escape such a possible discovery, Williams circled to the north, to ride in from there. He found his horse was taking its head, and he had neither the will nor energy to fight its drive.

He brought the animal to a stop at last behind a barn in an alley. For a few seconds he sat there, trying to gather some strength. Giddiness overcame him. His weakness became complete. . . .

Some time later, Chad Williams roused to the touch of a hand on his forehead. From the light, he knew day had come. He was on a bed, and somebody had put bandages on his arm and over his ribs.

Mrs. Carey was standing over him. She removed her hand and peered at him with the solemnity of a professional nurse

"Where am I?" Williams asked.

"In Limpy's room."

"How'd I get here?"

"Anne's horse brought you."

He pondered that. Of course. The bronc had returned to its home stable The two women had taken him in, and put him in Limpy's bed.

"Where's Anne?"

"Down waiting for the doctor. He's out on a case, but ought to be back any minute."

The pain in Chad Williams' body was a dull gnawing that brought the recollection of the resolution which had made him return to town. He sat up suddenly, looped his feet over the edge of the bed. They had put his gun on a chair near the head of the bed. He reached for it, buckled on the belt. When he stooped to pull on his boots, he almost fell.

"What do you think you're going to do?" Mrs. Carey asked.

"I can't stay here. I'd get yuh in trouble."

"No!" She tried to push him down on the bed.

He brushed her aside, and growled at her to tend to her own business.

"Anne said to keep you here until she got back. Watt Lawson and his gang are in town."

But Chad Williams only stood up, straightened his rumpled clothes, and hefted the gunbelt about his hips.

"Don't go, Chad," Mrs. Carey pleaded again. "As Anne says—no ranch is worth a man's life!"

But Chad shook his head.

"A man can't get away from trouble. Fast as he runs, it's always right behind him. Only thing to do is go and meet it."

HE WALKED past her, and outside. When he reached the street, he turned in the direction of town. He strode toward the Dobe Dollar. The bright light of the morning sun added a glint of gold to his tow-thatch

When Williams was a block from the saloon, Tap Ransdale came through the batwing doors. His stare was incredulous, and as soon as he was sure of his recognition, and

backed again into the saloon. Lawson and Farnsworth emerged.

Williams went on, and pulled to a stop before the two.

"I understand yuh're lookin' for me, Lawson," he said.

Neither Lawson nor Farnsworth made a move. But Lawson growled.

"We warned yuh, Chad."

Chad spread his feet apart, to hold himself erect. This was the showdown. The chips were in the pot, and it was time to turn up the cards.

From across the street, in front of the hotel, a voice that he recognized as Anne's came to him.

"Watch out, Chad—behind you!"

Even before she had finished the warning, a Colt barked and a slug whipped across the back of Williams' shirt.

Tap Ransdale had run out the rear door of the saloon, to sneak up a narrow passageway between two buildings. Chad Williams stepped out of the line of Tap's fire—and walked into a storm of lead!

A second bullet smashed into his left forearm. Another ripped into the right pocket of his levis, hammered against a silver dollar, and his whole leg had no more feeling than a wooden stump. But he was trading shots with the murdering pair.

Farnsworth went down, but a last convulsive jerk of his finger caused the hammer of his gun to fall once more, and that slug plowed into the plank walk at Williams' feet.

Through the powdersmoke swirling about him, Chad felt Lawson's eyes stabbing at him, and he knew he must not kill Lawson!

Tap had reached the end of the passageway. He stepped out behind Chad. Chad fought down the instinct to whirl and meet Tap. He steadied his arm and with a desperate hope he pressed the trigger.

Lawson grunted, as the slug hit him in the shoulder. He staggered sideward against the front of the saloon, and his gun clattered to the walk.

Just before Chad Williams turned, he saw the sheriff coming from his office down at the jail. Roy Blake was running—but he wouldn't get there in time!

When Tap saw he was left alone, he swung around and ran toward the alley. He tripped, and sprawled forward. He clawed for his gun and, as he rose, he fired at Williams who had come to the street end of the passageway. The bullet furrowed splinters from one side-wall.

Terror exploding within him, Tap fired another bullet. It was the last he ever fired, for a split second later Chad's gun cut him down.

Weakness washed over Chad Williams now. He braced himself against the corner of the saloon. When the street stopped its whirligig motion, he saw Anne watching him from beneath the wooden awning of the hotel. Henry Johnson was peering at him, too, out of the the door of the bank.

Watt Lawson had sagged down on an der and breathing heavily.

"Well, bub—" he began.

But Chad Williams focused his eyes on the sheriff. He cartwheeled his gun, caught it by the barrel, and held it toward Roy Blake.

THE sheriff took the weapon and shoved it beneath his belt.

"Better come along with me. And you, too, Watt. Yuh've got some explainin' to do."

Lawson bobbed his head at Williams.

"There's the hombre to answer yore questions," he said.

"Comin' peaceful, Watt?" The sheriff's gaze was as keen as a bowie.

"Yuh'll regret this, Blake." Lawson heaved himself to his feet..

The sheriff gave orders to some men to take care of Farnsworth and Tap. He turned back to Lawson and Williams.

"All right—le's go," he said.

Down before the jail was Sam Wendell, the marshal from Mustang, and Limpy. They followed the three into the office.

Chad Williams leaned back against the desk, glanced at Sam.

"What're yuh doing up here?" he asked.

"Yore friend said yuh needed some help."

"Yuh know this bozo?" Sheriff Blake asked the Mustang marshal.

"Shore—I know him," Sam said. "Like I told yuh—he didn't kill Harndow. Couple hombres called Spike Owens and Dirty-Shirt Malloy did. Yuh can ask that Chinese."

The sheriff looked at Lawson.

"Them two was yore men, Watt," he said.

Lawson tried to bluff it out. But it was plain he had a murder charge on his hands. And his dream of empire was fast dissolving under the impact of reality.

"It was Anne's idea, Chad," Limpy said, breaking in at last. "Told me to ride down there and find out just what did happen when her dad was killed. Sam decided to come back with me. We just got in a few minutes ago."

With his thumb and forefinger, Chad Williams tugged at his lower lip He turned his eyes to Roy Blake.

"Anne's a smart girl—she is," Limpy added.

"Yeh," the sheriff grunted. He rubbed the lump that was still on the side of his head. "She shore is."

A pressure began on the left side of Williams' chest. It had been Anne, he remembered suddenly, who had yelled that warning to him when Tap Ransdale was sneaking up behind him. For a second time, she had saved his life.

He stood up, his gaze still holding on the sheriff.

"Yuh won't be wanting me for a while?" he asked.

"Me?" the sheriff said. "Not right away. Maybe Sam here will want to use yuh when

Watt's trial comes up"

"I got to go see somebody."

"The Doc come in a minute ago," Roy Blake growled. "Better go and get yoreself fixed up."

"Yeh, shore—I'll do that."

"One thing more. I'm not forgettin' that crack on my head. If I don't get an invite, I'll dump yuh back in that cell, and this time I'll throw the key away."

Williams' neck felt as if somebody had built a fire there. The heat of it crept around to his jaws.

He walked to the door and pushed through the crowd that had gathered in front of the jail. When he found Limpy hobbling along behind him, he told the swamper to go back and get his gun. He didn't want anybody around when he talked with Anne. A man liked to be alone when he asked a woman to marry him.

When he had her answer, he'd see Henry Johnson about what could be done to gain time enough for them to meet the mortgage on the Circle 8. It wouldn't be hard now for Johnson to get the note back from Lawson, and they could sell some cows to raise the money.

They? Of course. If his proposition was agreeable to Anne, they'd be co-owners of the ranch.

For Tom Harndow hadn't been mistaken in his man, when he had made out that deed before he died down at Mustang.

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Marley's fist came up to land on Harmon's nose

CATTLE BUYER BEWARE!

By FRANK MORRIS

Range War Threatens as Young Cow Trader Steve Marley and a Rustler Chief Tangle for First Chance at Railroad Cars!

STEVE MARLEY wasn't surprised when big Gabe Harmon and his hired gun-hawk, "Chickasaw" Dent, rattled their spurs across the floor of his little shack of an office. But he wasn't smiling, either. Crumpling the telegram he had been reading, Marley threw it at the old pigeon-toed desk in the corner and jerked to his feet.

"All right, Gabe," he rapped out. "So yuh wired Burman, over my head—got authorization to ship yore Circle Bar scrubs in place of Peck McNeil's choice feeders. If yuh come in here to crow about that, yuh can just turn around and get out! Peck's got his cars ordered, and they're waitin' down on the sidin' right now. Sell yore culls to Ben Sweeten, if he's fool enough to take 'em. I can't use them ganted line-backs, and if Burman knew the truth, he'd not allow me to buy 'em, either. But I'll put Burman straight on that, yuh can bet—pronto!"

Gabe Harmon draped his lean, rawhide frame over the top of the desk and slowly built himself a cigarette. There was a crafty grin on his knife-cut of a mouth that tied in with the snaky little black eyes, deep-set

and glittering.

"I'm sellin' to you, Marley," the cowman drawled. "Yuh want to make somethin' out that, or yuh goin' to play along like yuh done last spring, and collect yore cut? I'm hazin' in my bunch tomorrow. You tally in them critters of mine and—"

"Yores?" cut in Marley. "What're yuh tryin' to do?"

Harmon's eyes were unwinking black beads. Chick Dent moved over from the door so that he faced the cattle buyer, his long fingers close to the twin six-guns on his hips.

"They're mine," Gabe Harmon said. "If yuh got any other ideas about that, keep 'em to yoreself. An' them cars belong to the B and M railroad. They ain't Peck's just 'cause he ordered 'em. He ain't goin' to use 'em, and I'm goin' to put my handle on the order to prove it. All you got to do is foller the orders yuh got in that there telegram yuh was readin' when me and Chick come in."

Steve Marley backed up against the wall. Sometimes it was almost more than he could stand, riding his temper with a curb bit, being the smooth-talking, hail-fellow buyer for Smith & Burman. He wished this second that his long barreled .45 was on his hip instead of in his warbag up at the hotel. His eyes narrowed, swept over the rock-faced gunny and big Gabe Harmon.

"I thought a telegram was private," he said. "How'd yuh know what was in it?"

"I get what I want in Big Prairie, Marley. Remember that, and yuh'll have easy ridin' on White Wolf Range. Forget it, and I'll plant yuh dead before loadin' time tomorrer!"

SIX feet, about, with his boots on, Steve Marley was a lithe, free-moving man. He was a head taller than Harmon, but blocky, with wide shoulders and a jaw that thrust out like a brown rock. There was a slight bow to his long legs, and that was only natural, for until just before spring calf crop he had been tophand and ramrod for old Peck McNeil's J M spread over on Antelope creek. Before that, from button on up, he had spent most of his time on good horses.

He planted himself in front of Harmon, snapped his Stetson back on his dead-grass-colored hair. Belligerence blazed from his blue eyes.

"Gabe," he accused, "yuh worked a slick one on that calf deal, and I'm not forgettin', but yuh've played out yore string here. Shore I bought yore cull calf crop last spring—against my better judgment, and to keep peace on White Wolf, mostly. But I done it, and my ears are still burnin' from the callin' down I got from Burman.

"It was the devil himself, though, that put yuh up to sendin' that check for ten per cent of the sale price to my boss in Chicago, tellin' him it was for me, for my cut because I pushed the sale of yore stuff in place of McNeil's better quality vealers. Why yuh done that I don't know, unless it was because yuh're a polecat and want to discredit both McNeil and me with the Burman agency, so's yuh can push the honest cowmen out of yore way and make good on yore grab of White Wolf range."

Gabe Harmon swung to his feet, sitting on the desk. A ruthless twist in his thin lips distorted the grin on his hollow-cheeked face.

"I ain't forgettin' the callin' yuh give me, Steve, when yuh found out about that check. I'm payin' off now." The cowman was as cool as a skunk prowling a trail at moon-high midnight.

Dent straightened up from his gunman's crouch, an ugly smile on his thick mouth.

"Come on, Gabe. You told him. He'll have them cars ready by sunup."

Marley thrust his hands down into his pockets. Red-hot anger blazed up above the collar of his white shirt.

"If yore Circle Bar critters was fancy slaughter grade, I'd still buy Peck McNeil's herd, Harmon," he said. "Peck's a square shooter. All spring and summer he's been fattenin' up them J M steers, feedin' grain for a month, toppin' off the best a feller can with range stock."

"So yuh're usin' yore connection with Burman to unload McNeil's stock," Harmon flung back. "That's what I figgered yuh'd do, Marley. If that got talked around, yuh'd be black-balled, wouldn't yuh? How'd yuh like that—to go back to punchin' cows at forty a month an' found?"

"You polecat!" Steve Marley gritted. "Yuh ain't got the nerve to do a thing like that."

"Take McNeil's herd and see," Harmon taunted. "But there ain't no sense in gettin' all riled—and yuh're all wrong about my stuff bein' poor grade. I've graded 'em up since last yuh been near my Circle Bar critters."

"Yuh mean yore runnin' iron's hot from makin' too many twins out of other men's stock, yuh cussed owlhoot!"

Gabe Harmon jerked erect. "You strap on a cutter when yuh start talking like that, hombre," he growled. "I'm roddin' this here range. Ask the sheriff."

"That tin-star is yore man, gun and badge," Marley snorted.

"Shore he's mine. He savvies. You better get that way fast, Marley. I'll be seein' yuh at sunup—and yuh better be waitin' with a check, by the loadin' chutes!"

Marley watched Gabe Harmon and Dent stalk on to the boardwalk. He fought down the desire to go up to the hotel and get his

.45, to strap it on and call Harmon for a showdown. That sort of action would only lead to more trouble, and when Burman heard of it, one Steve Marley would be all through as a cattle buyer. That is, if he were lucky enough to win out against Chick Dent's fast guns.

His thoughts were as bleak and cold as the gray bowl of the sky rimming the prairie on all its perimeter, as he left his office. The chill promise of winter was in the cold-fingered fall wind searching his thin town clothing, as he moseyed down the street.

Tumbleweeds, sear and skeletal, rolled and jumped before him. Like giant puffballs they were, that piled against the scattered shacks and false-fronted buildings crouching doggedly on the edge of the streets and cross lanes.

High overhead a wedge of fluttering mallards pointed south. Wash lines bannered in the wind and snapped like a hundred quirts. Swirls of dust funneled up from the stock corrals and loading pens, to be gathered in the higher strato-cumulus and bowled across the cheerless sky.

MARLEY got his roan horse at the livery, slapped on his big, double-rigged stock saddle.

"That hoss is shore stacked up on fat an' meriness," the hostler offered. "Reckon yuh better do some ridin', or he'll be gettin' to think he's circle hoss in a rough string."

"And I better be doin' some business, or I'll be ridin' the kinks out of some cowman's rough string—or mebbe ridin' the grub-line," Marley said bitterly, settling down in the hull. "Sweeten seems to be gettin' all the business on White Wolf."

"He won't get Peck McNeil's herd," the hostler said. "Peck went by here not more'n five minutes ago, and he shore was riled. Said he'd heard that Gabe Harman was figgerin' on usin' the stock cars that Peck'd signed for. Reckon yuh better look into that, Marley, or you'll be left settin' flat on the seat of yore pants. That Gabe feller is out to run things hereabouts, or I miss my guess. For a new hand on this range, he's shore gettin' things corraled for hisself."

Marley didn't wait to hear more from the loquacious hostler. He touched with his hooks and rode to the depot. Three ponies, backs kinked in the cold, stood with trailing reins in front of the station house. The sound of harsh talk bounced out at him as he stepped down and made for the door.

Short and wiry, a cowman from his bowlegs to the crown of his tall Stetson, Peck McNeil stood there by the counter, pounding a gnarled fist on the boards. Fire flashed behind the bright blue of his eyes as he stared first at the station agent, then at Gabe Harmon and Chickasaw Dent.

"Well, speak up." Peck demanded. "What yuh goin' to do about it?"

His weather-blackened face, with its sparse beard of grizzled, wiry whiskers, was screwed up into a knot with the hot anger that coursed through his rawhide frame.

Marley took in the scene and felt the bitter taste of defeat. With old Peck on the prod, there was no telling what might happen.

Cantankerous when things were running smoothly, Peck was a pile of tangled barbed wire when he was crossed. For Harmon to try to horn in on White Wolf after dragging a hungry loop around other men's cattle, Peck's especially, would lead to but one thing—a bloody range war.

And that would be the end of Steve Marley, cattle buyer. With the trouble Gabe had already caused Steve to have with Burman, he wasn't on any too secure a footing with his boss. The commission agent was not in business for his health, and to lose out on the J M quality beef, even though Harmon's lies were behind the whole mess, would not put dollars in Burman's pockets. Burman would expect Steve Marley to keep things straight and operating smoothly at his end.

Carl Thompson, the station agent, stood by his desk behind the counter, his soft hands trembling. He was slack-chinned, white-faced individual who spent most of his spare time in the saloons, or following Gabe Harmon and men of his type around. He was not the kind of man who would help in Big Prairie's growth. That was a fact, and at the moment he had all the bluster of a cornered mouse, and was about as talkative.

Harmon and Chick Dent looked up as Marley entered, and pushed away from the counter to face him. Dent's hands, never far from his .45s, hovered close to the walnut stocks heeling up from his sagging belts. A sneer of contempt spread Gabe Harmon's snake-lipped mouth.

"Them cars are mine, Thompson," Peck growled. "I don't care if Harmon did tell yuh I wasn't goin' to ship. I'm runnin' my outfit, not him. I'll bet a hammerhead bronc yuh're playin' his game!"

The agent rubbed a white hand over his jaws and pulled his green eyeshade lower over his shifty eyes.

"But—but—" he stammered, throwing a furtive glance at Harmon. "Gabe—"

"I don't give a hairyip what yore owlhoot pard said!" exploded Peck. "I'm tellin' yuh that—"

"Hold it, Peck," Marley broke in. A wild plan was reacing through his brain. It might work. At least, it was better than letting things go as they were. "Don't get all riled. Let Gabe have them cars, let him ship tomorrow. I'll take on yore J M stock next week, or later."

"What?" shouted the old cowman. "Steve Marley, yuh two-tongued son! Yuh said yuh was goin' to take on my herd. Then what this here 'conejo blanco' of a clerk said is true. Yuh're takin' Gabe's Circle-Bar stuff an' usin' my cars! Why—why—" fairly sputtered McNeil.

"Them's my cars, by thunder! I signed for 'em, and I'm goin' to use 'em. I'll prod them cows to Chicago and sell 'em myself! I don't have to wait on no . . . Why, good glory! I took yuh off'n the grub line two years ago, give yuh a job, and when yuh showed signs of havin' a bit more sense'n the average saddle bum, I helped yuh get yore job with Burman!"

Steve Marley's eyes narrowed, watching Harmon and his gunny.

"Yuh can't get more'n fifteen or eighteen dollars a head, Peck," he said. "Yuh know that. I'll get yuh twenty. I'll put it in writin' —guarantee it. We'll ship later."

THE ringy old cowman's eyes slitted until they were mere chill cracks in his leathery face.

"You'll guarantee it!" he snorted, disgust riding his voice. "Yuh good-for-nothin' liar!"

Marley's lips thinned, and the flush of sudden anger surged over his blocky face. A year ago he would have killed a man for calling him that. But now he choked down the retort clamoring for utterance.

"What yuh think I been usin' for money?" Peck demanded. "I'm up to my neck with credit. I've got to sell—pronto! But I shore don't have to sell to you!"

"Wait a minute, Peck," Marley said, forcing a calmness into his voice that he was far from feeling. "If I was free to explain—"

"Explain to the devil, if yuh want to," McNeil grated.

He stamped to the door. In the entrance he spun around on his Justins. Flame flecked his eyes. His rope-twisted finger pointed like a six-gun at the station agent.

"You have them cars on the sidin' tomorrow forenoon, Thompson, or I'll hang yore hide!"

He slammed the door.

A grin oiled over Harmon's bony cheeks. "Yuh're gettin' smart, Steve," he drawled. "Play along with me and yuh'll make mucho dinero, as they say down where I come from." The lanky cowman moved over beside Marley. "And I got other plans. Want to hear 'em?"

Marley fought down the desire to smash his fist against that raw cut of a mouth. He was aware that Dent, moving with the stealth of a cat, had closed in on his left.

"Don't tell it, Gabe," Dent said. "I don't trust this slick-ear."

"I'll do the thinkin' for this outfit," snapped Harmon. "Yuh're paid to use them cutters. Nothin' else."

"I'm listenin'," Steve Marley said flatly. Maybe he could learn something.

"It's thisaway, Marley," Gabe Harmon said, resting his big hand on the cow buyer's shoulder. "We got this thing figgered out so's we can ship my Circle Bar stuff tomorrer mornin'. Then we'll ride north to the Antelope and make a quick gather of McNeil's bunch. Peck's ridin' day circle on his critters. They're bunched perfect. It'll be easy as pourin' lick on a hot day. Trail them fat J M steers down here and load in the cars, extry ones I ordered today, and ship out under my name. Two train loads, mine and Peck's. Work that over in your think-box. How'd yuh like, say five per cent of that kind of deal?"

Red-hot fury blazed in Marley's face. He jerked away from the Circle Bar cowman. Without warning, his fist came up in a roundhouse to land flush on Harmon's big beak of a nose.

There was a pop of mashed flesh and cartilage. Blood spattered. The big rancher stumbled back against the counter, pawing at his broken nose. The sharp pain brought a string of curses barking from his twisting lips.

Marley's left followed, a flash of swift motion, to sink into Chick Dent's flat middle. The gunny grunted like a paunch-shot buffalo and jack-knifed to the floor, gasping.

Marley grasped Harmon by the shirt front and shoved him onto the one bench in the waiting room. He pulled a bandanna from his pocket, threw it at the cowman.

"Wipe yore nose, and listen to what I've got to say," he ordered.

Harmon applied the handkerchief to his bleeding nose.

"You try that plan of yores, an' I'll pull yuh apart, yuh big lobo," Marley panted.

Thompson leaned over the counter like one hypnotized, stupid with fear. His mouth opened and close, fishlike, silent.

There was a slight pause in the gunny's gasping, a scrape of boots on the floor. Steve Marley spun around in time to see Dent level a six-gun. Without a perceptible pause in Marley's fast coordination between brain and body, he dived to one side, the flame of the roaring .45 searing its hot breath past his cheek and slapping lead into the rear wall over the station agent's head.

Thompson screeched and ducked down behind his counter.

Marley threw himself at the gunman on the floor, plucked the smoking six-gun out of the air as it fell from Chick's hand. He brought it up crashing, trading hot lead in a savage duel at close quarters with Gabe Harmon's hired killer, who had snatched out his left-hand Colt.

Suddenly Dent jerked, quivered and flopped prone on the dirty floor. Red blood

spewed from his horribly twitching mouth and smeared his shirt front. Unlike another kind of snake, he couldn't wait for sundown to die. His eyes were glazing as Marley turned to Harmon.

But the big cowman had had enough for the moment, and sat there on the bench, mopping at the blood streaming down his face. He said:

"You cussed son, you!"

The track crew came on the run from the train on the siding. But Steve Marley was in the saddle and raking the roan's ribs by the time they reached the station house.

Marley pulled to a hoof-sliding halt in front of the hotel, ran inside and leaped up the stairs. He let himself into his room and locked the door.

BIG PRAIRIE came to life with a bang. Marley could hear someone shouting down the street. That would be in the Trail's End Saloon, Gabe Harmon's hang-out when in town.

"Funny how a little shootin' starts things to boilin'," Marley muttered, dabbing a clean towel at the crease Dent's lead had cut in his cheek.

His movements were quick and sure as he dug out his six-gun and belt. He rubbed the oily gun dry with an old shirt, and strapped it about his slim hips. No time now for the niceties of town life, for quiet argument and reserved statement. Marley clocked out the wheel and loaded the .45, shoved it into the chamois-lined holster. Chick Dent's six-gun he slipped under the waistband of his pants, went down stairs, and out into the gathering dark of the fall night.

On his roan, he wheeled and reined in to face Sheriff Al Dawson on a big blaze-faced sorrel trotting out of the shadow of the cross street at the side of the hotel.

"Hold on, Marley!" the lawman ordered.

Dawson was a slim, slope-shouldered man with a long, walrus mustache that hid his mouth. His sleepy eyes were the color of dirty slough ice in the spring. Heavy lids slanted down over them and gave him a peculiar expression, with the narrow shelving forehead and the close set of the faded orbs hugging the high-bridged nose. But not a man to move quickly.

Dawson didn't now. He brought the .30-30 carbine in his hand slowly to bear on Marley's Bull Durham pocket.

"I'm wantin' you, Marley," he said, "for the murder of Chickasaw Dent!"

But even as the sheriff spoke, Marley's spurs were touching his mount. The roan leaped ahead as he felt them, a charging war horse that smashed into the lawman's pony to send him reeling, squealing, falling with his rider. Dawson's carbine crashed flame and smoke, but was knocked from his hand by the force of the spill and clattered on the walk.

Across lots and through the refuse-littered alleys Steve Marley urged his horse. A wild rattle of shots broke out behind him, and whining chunks of lead sizzled past horse and rider to kick into the dusty streets. But none found a mark as the cattle buyer firmly guided the roan into shadows and over fences and out of Big Prairie into the rolling range land.

A mile from town Marley swung off the road and lit out for Antelope Creek and Peck McNeil's spread. With luck he should be there in another hour.

"Chousin' right into another peck of trouble," he told the roan, and slapped good-naturedly at the wet hide. Steve Marley felt a close bond between himself and the gelding pounding over the short grass. "Just you and me, Red," he muttered, "against the whole of White Wolf."

The swift-gathering dark promised a cold, bleak night, with wind, maybe sleet, before morning. A flock of prairie chickens whirred up at Marley's sod-thudding approach, planed off into the night. Once the roan set hoof into a badger hole, dogged his head and would have stumbled but for his rider's steady hand on the reins that picked him out of it and urged him on.

Topping the low rise of the Antelope's near bank, Steve Marley pulled his horse up and walked him, sides heaving, toward the ghostly looming cottonwoods and crouching willow thickets that marked Peck's J M layout. A hundred yards from the creek, he made out the sprawling, dirt-roofed log shacks and sheds. Crowding down to the pale silver of the water were corrals of peeled lodge-pole from the Black Hills, and a scatteration of smaller pens with cutting chutes connecting.

On a level flat, the high pointing poles of a squeeze chute thrust up toward the slice of moon tilting at the flying scud. Like the weather-grayed ribs of a cast critter they were.

Peck was holding a big cavvy. They milled, snorted and whinnied a welcome to Marley's roan. Marley prevented an answer by holding his hand over Red's velvet nose and carefully led the foam-flecked roan to within fifty feet of the ranchhouse.

He stopped there, trailed the reins. South and east he could hear the far-away bellowing of bedding cows. That would be Peck's bunch of J M steers with the evening guard relieving the afternon dayherd boys. That would leave proddy old Peck McNeil alone, more than likely, behind that lighted window in the house.

Steve Marley loosened his six-gun and stalked in close to the door. Bracing himself for swift action, he suddenly flung the door wide and leaped into the lighted house.

Peck whirled around from the stove perched on rock legs in the corner. The long-handled spoon he whipped from the big squirrel pan of son-of-a-gun stew dripped and steamed in the cold air flowing in behind Marley.

"What yuh doin' here?" the rancher demanded, his blue eyes crackling fire.

A WIDE grin spread over Marley's rugged jaw.

"Yuh old warthog," he laughed, thumbing back the hammer of his Colt. "Yuh're like a old scaly-back full of loco weed. Yuh got to be throwed, tied and drenched before yuh'll listen to sense."

"Say!" growled the cowman, blood darkening his cheeks. "I told yuh I don't want no more truck with yuh, nor yore cow-buyin' outfit, neither. What's the idea, pullin' a gun on me?"

"I'm takin' over your J M bunch. We're drivin' to town, right now! And this hog-leg is ready to paw an' beller if yuh get ringy about it, Peck."

"You get out of here!" shouted McNeil, beside himself with the wild Irish temper that lunged through his wiry old frame.

"Come on, take off that oat-sack apron, Peck," Steve Marley said. "You and me are goin' out to the corral and saddle yore top night hoss. Then we're goin' out to the gather and mustard up them lard backs of yores and start the drive to town. Don't yuh savvy what I'm drivin' at, yuh old kink horn?"

Peck's eyes grew wide in his leathery face. "Yuh mean yuh're goin' to ship my stuff—after what yuh said in the depot today?"

"Now yuh got it." Marley chuckled. "Rattle yore hocks, old-timer. We're beatin' Gabe Harmon at his own game. He told me today what he'd planned—to clean you out. With them hired gun-hands of his, yuh know what that'd mean."

"Range war!" Peck's jaw dropped.

"Shore."

"But that Chick Dent feller—he's poison with sixes. Yeah, and Gabe hisself ain't so far behind him. They'll be drivin' in sometime in the forenoon. When they see us loadin', they'll start pumpin' lead."

"Chick's dead," Steve Marley said thinly, and touched his six-gun. "And I've got more for any others with crazy ideas like that. If we hurry, we'll be loaded and ready to hook on at train time."

Peck's eyes popped. "Does—did anybody see yuh gun Dent?"

"Dawson."

"The sheriff! Steve, you can't buck everybody. Yuh'll throw me into the fight."

"For a riled old mossback, yuh shore cool easy," Marley rapped. "When did the J M ever back down in front of a fight? Here!" He pulled out a tally-book, ripped out a page, and scratched over the paper with a stub pencil. "There! Twenty dollars a head at Chicago. My guarantee. Burman will back it when he sees yore tallow-packed cows in the Union Stockyards.

"If he don't back me, I'll rustle a buyer myself. You sell to that scalper, Ben Sweeten, and yuh won't clear fifteen dollars a head. Makin' a night drive like this, we might run into trouble. There's a good chance Dawson'll be on my trail, or mebbe Gabe will, but that's the chance we've got to take if yuh want to sell your J M increase. What yuh say?"

A foolish grin spread over the rancher's face. "Reckon I been a danged old hammerhead, Steve. This is what yuh was thinkin' in town today. Yuh agreed with Gabe about takin' his cows so's to throw him off, and get in this here night drive and beat him to the cars!"

Peck yanked off his apron and strapped on a long-barreled old Peacemaker. He hurriedly slapped a battered old Stetson on his head.

"Let her buck, Steve!" he shouted. "And if that there paid-for tin-star tries anything, I'll shoot him dead and kill him for keeps. By golly, White Wolf's goin' to get a new deal, from here on out!"

Marley and McNeil roped out a short-coupled little dun, dropped Peck's old hull on his back, and started out for the herd on bed ground.

It was considerably past midnight when the J M punchers got Peck's bunch up and lined out for the drive.

"By golly," grunted Peck, reining in beside Marley, "if it wasn't for the sky clearin' as she did, givin' us a little light, we'd never have made it. As it is, we'll have to be mighty careful or them steers'll spook up and make a run."

"Not with old Blue there in the lead," Marley said, pointing to the wide-horned old trail steer trotting out at point. "Didn't even have to cut him out. He savvied what was up first time we sung 'em on their feet, poked through them fat critters a-shakin' them three-foot horns of his like he knew what we wanted. Reckon we can depend on him like we can on them punchers of yore'n. They strapped on their six-guns when I told 'em the lay."

"Yeah," Peck McNeil said. "But what's got me worried is what'll happen when we get to town. If we get us a stampede, Gabe'll beat us to the cars. And yet, if everything goes smooth, we'll have to load with them critters ganted from the drive and no feed in 'em. . . I don't like it, even a little bit, Steve."

"Yuh shore yuh ain't Scotch, Peck?" drawled Marley. "I'm standin' to lose more'n a little lard. . . ."

THE sun was up, a pale disc of light behind the cold mist blanketing the stretching prairie when the J M herd reached the loading pens at the B and M siding. Steve Marley rode on ahead to the station. He found Thompson poking dry chips into the stove in the waiting room. The slack-jawed agent looked up, pop-eyed, with the color draining from his face. He backed up against the counter.

"Don't—don't shoot," he managed finally. "Yuh make any trouble here and I'll—I'll . . . The sheriff's lookin' for you!"

"Simmer down, key-puncher," Marley snapped. "The J M herd is here and ready to load. I want the track crew—pronto!"

The agent pointed to the window. "Outside—in the bunk car. But you—"

"But nothin'. You and me are turnin' 'em out of their soogans right now. When them chutes are opened, with Peck's critters on the ramps, I want them empties on the sidin' with the doors open, ready to fill. To keep everything straight, you dig out the original of Peck's car order and cancel Harmon's, savvy?"

The little agent stammered out agreement, his head nodding, but he ran around the counter and tore Gabe Harmon's order from the file board.

Down at the track crew's car, Marley rapped on the door and brought the men tumbling out into the cold. The foreman agreed to the earlier hour and promised to get up steam in the yard hog at once. Marley left then for the pens, and when the cattle were eased into the wings of the big, square railroad-tie main corral, he gave a sigh of relief. Peck McNeil and his boys could get them into the sorting alleys and cut them into the loading pens without his help.

But trouble wouldn't end with the cows loaded. Marley wasn't fooling himself about that. Riding down the main street, he pulled up at the edge of town. Faintly to his ears came the far-away bawling of moving cattle, off to the south toward the north fork of the Platte. Harmon's herd.

Marley pulled in behind the livery barn. He was out of sight there, and yet he could watch the south trail where it cut into the aimlessly wandering main street where it left the town. Pulling out his six-gun, he cocked it, his nerves tingling in his lean body.

He didn't have long to wait. Three riders came pounding out of the dust kicked up by the Circle Bar herd. Marley waited, the cold sweat standing out on his blocky face.

One of the riders was Gabe Harmon. No mistaking that big owlhoot standing stiff in his ox-bows, quirting both flanks of his racing mount.

Dawson rode on one side of him, and on the other was a rider Marley didn't know. But as they swirled down into the outskirts, Marley was not left in doubt of the kind of puncher riding with Harmon and the sheriff. The man sat slack in his hull, seemingly a part of his horse. Two six-guns rode low on his thighs. Another Circle Bar gunslick.

Steve Marley climbed back in his saddle and rode out into the street to meet them, six-gun in hand swinging by his side.

Dawson was in the lead when the Circle Bar riders came to a sliding halt thirty feet from Marley.

"Throw down that six, Steve Marley," the lawman said levelly.

"Come and get it, yuh paid-for tin-badge!" Marley said.

Harmon stepped down from his horse. Hate burned in his little black eyes.

"Marley," he said tightly, "yuh're goin' at this in a way that'll get yuh planted six foot under. Think yuh pulled a fast little trick, don't yuh, loadin' Peck's cows over there. By godfrey, I'll show yuh what for!" The big rancher whirled on Dawson. "You throw Marley in yore jail! We'll get the boys and make our clean-up now. With McNeil out of the way, we'll ride them cars right in to the Windy City—sell 'em ourselves. I'll squeeze a bill of sale for them J M critters outa Peck's ringy old hide. You and Tex here can see to the loadin' of our Circle Bar stuff next week."

Steve Marley's face was rocky, set. "Yuh're forgettin' one thing, Gabe," he said, his voice flat, icy. "I don't aim to cool my boots in Dawson's jail. Here and now I'm callin' yore hand—you and yore hired guns! Yore order for stock cars is canceled. Peck's about loaded. Yuh're through on White Wolf!"

Gabe Harmon turned around to stare at Marley. He was as cool and deadly in his movements as a bobcat with a rabbit in its jaws.

"Yuh're callin' my hand?" He scoffed. "Marley, you lift that six, and we'll ventilate yore hide till it looks like a sieve. Throw it down! And I'll give yuh ten minutes to get out of town!"

"Who do yuh think yuh are?" Marley blazed. "You orderin' me out of town! Why, yuh sneakin' polecat—"

He heard a pounding of hoofs behind him, a horse coming fast. He couldn't turn now, didn't dare take his eyes from the lanky puncher beside Gabe Harmon. Marley could see the man's hands inching toward the six-guns on his hips. Dawson's hand, he could see, too, was splayed over the black butt of his .45.

This was the show-down!

IN ANOTHER moment, all perdition would break loose. Cold clutched at Marley's insides, his stomach tied itself into a hard knot, as he sat there on Red's long back. In a shoot-out, facing these three gunmen, he wouldn't stand a chance. He

might get one of them, but the other two would shoot him to pieces.

Or could they? There was a little trick he could work, a twist and a quirk. The shooting would warn Peck McNeil, at least, give him a chance to defend himself. If they acted fast, maybe they could down Harmon or Dawson, or both, before the rest of the Circle Bar punchers got into town.

There was only one move. Marley's lips were white as he tensed his right arm. He would have to be quick.

"Just lift my arm, squeeze that trigger," he told himself. "That's all there'd be to it. Cock that gun and shoot it—and shoot it again, as many times as there were bullets in it."

Slowly, his arm inched up. Soon it would be level, in plain sight over the saddle-horn. Gabe Harmon and his two killers would make their play then.

The pound of the approaching rider grew loud in Marley's ears. Suddenly a six-gun crashed. Something kicked at Steve Marley, almost threw him from the roan.

Red reared up on his hind legs, pawing the air, pivoted as Thompson, the station agent, raced by, a six-gun still smoking in his hand. The face he turned toward Marley was white, drawn. Fear bulged his eyes, as though he were afraid Marley might turn his gun on him. And then he was gone, bent over and clinging to his saddle as his horse raced on into town.

Steve Marley's left arm swung, dead and lifeless. He could feel warm blood leap and run down his sleeve as he wheeled the roan and blasted hot lead at big Gabe Harmon, crouched there in the street.

The big rancher's six-gun was out and roaring, but the bullets were spilling into the dust, kicking it about Marley's horse and slapping into the side of the livery barn behind him. Harmon's shirt front suddenly spouted red, and the cowman crow-hopped back on his spike heels, to fall and roll crazily, grunting, jerking like a Sunday chicken at the chopping block.

The six-gun of the other gunslick and that of the sheriff barked together, sent a hail of lead flying about the rearing roan gelding. Marley weaved in the hull, thumbed his gun-hammer, saw blood smear the lawman's mouth and chin.

But the Texas gunslick's lead found a mark, sliced into Marley's pommel and tore into his thigh. Sick with the sharp pain, he lost his seat and fell from his horse. He rolled clear of the flashing hoofs and froze, immobile. His six-gun had been knocked from his hand in the fall, and the gunman was there ten feet in front of him, kneeling, in the street, a six-gun gripped in his hand, and sighting down the long, black barrel.

Like a trapped wolf, Steve Marley glared up at the puncher. There was no fear in his eyes as he lay there, only flaming hate and the will for survival. But the wires were down. His legs wouldn't move. Then, from the rear, from the loading pens, came the deep-throated roar of a .45. The gunman toppled over into the dusty street, bright blood staining his side.

Peck McNeil and his boys had to pull the protesting Marley off the Texan, pry his hands from the dead man's blue neck.

"Steve," McNeil said, "for a cow buyer, yuh're shore one rip-snortin' fightin' man!"

Steve Marley grinned.

Next Issue: NAVAJO TURNS FIREBUG, an Arizona Ranger Story by Jackson Cole

■

Red Davis turned as he suddenly saw Flint in the mirror

WANTED HOMBRE

By SAM BRANT

Sheriff Flint Knew the Bank Was Going to Be Robbed—for it Was the Robber Himself Who Told Him About it in Advance!

FOLKS back in the Montana hills said that Sheriff John Flint was a hard, relentless man. He worked alone most of the time, even though he did have a pair of capable deputies, but he seldom failed to get the outlaws he went after.

"Looks to me like Flint is afraid to smile for fear of crackin' his face," said old Matt Dawson, the Beaver Creek blacksmith, whose tongue made as much noise as his anvil. "And that's only one of the reasons I'd shore hate to tangle with that two-gun lawman."

Nobody paid Dawson much mind, usually, but on that one point the Beaver Creek citizens were inclined to agree with him. Not that Sheriff John Flint had a mean disposition. He just never had been a man to talk, unless he figured he really had something to say.

Flint was lean and tall, and for a man who was scarcely thirty, he was remarkably stern-faced. He always wore a flat-crowned Stetson, and well kept range clothes—along with an expression that seemed to say he smelled something he didn't like.

He got along well with his two deputies though. The fact that he could draw faster and shoot quicker than either Dan Bristol or Ed Sand might have had something to do

with it. Those two seemed to be affected with a touch of hero worship as far as the sheriff was concerned.

It was a balmy, bright spring morning when trouble came looking for Sheriff John Flint. The lawman was sitting in his office, looking over a packet of reward posters that had just arrived in the mail. His two deputies, Dan and Ed, were with him.

Deputy Dan Bristol was a big, sloppy man, with a middle that was like loose dough. He always gave the impression of having never quite finished dressing. Usually, one or two buttons were open on his shirt, and the vest he wore looked like it was made of old sacking. Ed Sand claimed when Bristol got riding with that vest flapping, he looked like a blown-up scarecrow that was just about to start flying.

DEPUTY ED SANDS, in contrast to Bristol's bulk, was small and wiry, and acted and looked like a busy black squirrel. He just never seemed able to keep still for more than a few seconds at a time.

"Anybody we know, Sheriff?" Sand asked, darting a glance at the posters the sheriff was reading. "It's been too quiet around here this past week or so. I shore crave action."

"Un huh," remarked Bristol from where he lounged on the steps of the sheriff's office, gazing down the cowtown's long dusty street. "Takin' it easy don't bother me none."

"Nothing special in these reward posters," said the sheriff. It was only the second time he had spoken in the past hour.

"Looks like we're going to have a visitor," announced Bristol from his relaxation spot at the door. "There's a hombre ridin' this way on a roan. Looks like a stranger. He's big and red-headed and forkin' a double-rigged saddle."

"That's nice." Ed Sand glanced out the window at the approaching rider. "Yuh reckon he uses two cinches because he's afraid of fallin' off that horse?"

"Not that Jasper," Bristol sighed. "He's a right salty-lookin' gent."

"Here I thought I had me a couple of deputies," said the sheriff. "And they turn out to be gossiping old women."

"Aw, you're just sayin' that because you like us, Sheriff," muttered Ed Sand. "Yep, we got a visitor, all right."

The red-headed stranger dismounted at the hitching rail in front of the office and tied the roan to the pole. He moved deliberately, as he shook out the saddle kinks, in the manner a man does who has ridden far. Then he glanced at Dan Bristol sitting in the doorway.

"You the sheriff?" he asked in a deep voice.

"Not guilty as accused," wheezed Bristol. "I'm just a poor deputy."

John Flint rose from the desk and walked to the door. Bristol edged his bulk aside so the sheriff could pass. Ed Sand peered tautly around Flint's shoulder.

"I'm Red Davis," said the stranger. "And you must be Sheriff John Flint."

"That's right." Flint nodded.

"And that tub of lard is Deputy Dan Bristol," put in Ed Sand, pointing. "An' I'm Ed Sand, the sheriff's best deputy."

"The pleasure is all yores," said Red Davis dryly. "I just came to warn you, Sheriff."

"About what?" Flint's tone was curt.

"That I aim to kill a man and rob the bank before I leave this town," he said quietly.

Ed Sand jerked, like a squirrel at a gunshot.

"Now I've heard everything," he exclaimed in a high-pitched burst. "You weren't thinkin' of doin' a little rustlin' on the side while yuh're at it, were yuh, Davis?"

"No—I hate rustlers," Davis said.

John Flint looked thoughtfully at the big red-headed stranger. For a man to admit he was going to kill someone and rob a bank was hardly the usual way of doing things. Davis didn't look like a fool. He probably had some reason for telling the Law his plans.

"Just who are you aimin' to kill?" asked the sheriff.

"A lawman," announced Red Davis.

"Papa, tell that big bad man to go away. He frightens me," said Sand in a thin, mocking tone. He was still standing behind the sheriff. "Besides, I think he's plumb loco."

"I might arrest you and put you in jail until yuh get over feelin' so impulsive, Davis," Sheriff Flint said, irritably.

"Arrest me on what charge?" demanded Davis. "I haven't done anything yet. Do you think anyone would believe you if yuh claimed I rode up and deliberately told you three lawmen that I planned to kill a man and rob the bank?"

Flint didn't say anything. There was something to Davis' point. No one would believe that an outlaw would tell the sheriff and his two deputies of his plans.

The red-headed stranger laughed as he saw the expressions of the faces of Sand and Bristol. They were obviously both perplexed.

"I'll be around town for awhile if yuh want me for anything, Sheriff." Davis turned and walked back to his horse. He unfastened the reins and swung into the saddle. "See yuh around."

They watched as Red Davis rode down the street. He halted his horse in front of the Golden Eagle Saloon. He tied the roan to the hitching rail and went in through the swinging doors.

The three lawmen looked silently at one another.

"That man is dangerous," the sheriff said. "Dan, you and Ed better guard the bank tonight."

"You really think he's goin' to try and rob the bank, Sheriff?" Sand exclaimed in surprise. "I figgered he was just talkin'."

"He did sound like he meant it," agreed Bristol, thoughtfully massaging his double chin. "We'd be the laughingstock of the country if folks learned that Davis told us just what he aimed to do, and then got away with it."

"Which may be just what Red Davis has in mind," said the sheriff. He stepped back into the office. "Some men get a big kick out of tryin' to make fools of the Law."

AS the day wore on, Flint and his two deputies found themselves busy with their usual routine duties, but the sheriff found time to check on Red Davis. The stranger spent the afternoon sitting in a poker game in the saloon. He nodded casually to Flint when the sheriff dropped in there for a drink. The sheriff lingered a while, and then departed.

It was the last day of the month. Tomorrow, Sheriff Flint knew, the cattle outfits around Beaver Creek would pay off their men, so there was a sizeable sum of cash in the bank. He thought of warning Tom Grant, the local banker, of Red Davis' threats, but then decided against it. Grant would think the sheriff was crazy if he told a story like that.

The Overland stage rolled into town. Outlaw Red Davis came out of the saloon as it did, and stood on the plank walk, watching. A big box was unloaded from the coach, and four men carried it into the express office.

The sheriff strolled up to Davis and stood beside him. Davis nodded.

"That box looks heavy enough to contain gold," he said casually. "Maybe I made a mistake in planning to rob the bank instead of the express office."

"Robbing either one would be a mistake on yore part," said the sheriff grimly.

The stage driver snapped his long whip over the backs of his six-horse team, and the Overland again headed out of town. Flint and Davis stood there, silently watching. It was growing dark, and soon it would be night.

Five horsemen rode into town, and the sheriff's eyes narrowed. The riders drew up in front of the saloon and Flint saw they were all hard-faced gunslicks. They paid attention neither to the sheriff nor to Davis as they tied their horses at the hitch-rail and went into the saloon.

"Yore men, Davis?" the sheriff asked quietly.

"I'd be a fool to tell you if they were." Davis smiled, and then strolled across the street to the hotel.

He disappeared inside the two-story frame building.

Sheriff Flint frowned, and walked down the street toward his office. Night had now descended, and a light gleamed through the windows of the bank. Tom Grant and his teller were working late there, getting ready for the rush that would come with the morning.

Deputy Ed Sand had gone for the mail that had arrived on the stage. Deputy Dan Bristol stood in the shadows outside the bank—on guard there, as the sheriff had ordered.

Flint nodded to the stout deputy, as he passed on down the street, but neither man spoke.

At his office, the sheriff lighted the oil lamp on his desk. Sand came in a few minutes later, carrying the handful of mail he had got from the stage. He gave the letters to the sheriff.

"Davis ain't robbed the bank or killed anybody yet," Sand said, in a gay, chipper tone. "I don't think he's goin' to do anythin'. He's just bluffing."

"Maybe." Flint slit open an envelope, and drew out a reward poster that had been mailed him from a sheriff in Texas. "But look at this."

Ed Sand drew closer to the desk and stared at the poster.

Wanted:
RED DAVIS
Dead or Alive!

And under that caption was a picture of the red-headed stranger.

"Leaping frogs legs!" exclaimed the little deputy. "He's a real outlaw, and he's wanted for murder and robbery. It says so in that small print under the picture. We better bring him in before he really does start somethin', Sheriff."

Up the street, guns suddenly blasted. Flint leaped to the door. Sand was close behind him, as they made it outside.

In front of the express office, riders were milling around. Flame flashed from their guns. "They're robbing the express office!" Ed Sand shouted.

With guns in their hands, the two lawmen raced up the street. The sheriff glimpsed the bank, as he passed it. The light was still burning there, and everything seemed quiet. But Sloppy Dan Bristol was no longer waiting in the shadows. The stout deputy had apparently gone to defend the express office.

THE four riders stopped shooting before Flint and Sand reached the express office. They headed out of town at a gallop, disappearing into the night. A crowd gathered, and the express agent saw the sheriff.

"Craziest holdup I ever seen," said the agent, hurrying up. "Them five jaspers didn't try to take a thing, Sheriff. Just stayed out in front, yelling and shooting at the building, and then rode away. It don't make sense."

"It does to me." Flint whirled, and started

back toward the bank. "Come on, Ed."

The little deputy joined the running sheriff. They reached the bank together. Its front door was closed, but unlocked. Flint stepped inside, with Sand behind him. Tom Grant was lying on the floor, and so was Nelson, the teller. Quick scrutiny showed they were unconscious from hard blows on the head. But a third figure—a stout, untidy man sprawled near the door—told a more serious story. The man had been shot in the head.

"He said he was going to kill a man—a lawman," Sand muttered, fearfully. "He didn't really kill Dan, did he, Sheriff?"

Flint, kneeling beside Bristol, turned him over gently. There was no doubt about it now. Big, sloppy Dan Bristol was dead.

"Davis did this!" Flint groaned. "Those five gunslicks were his men. He had them stage that fake holdup at the express office to attract everyone's attention—while he robbed the bank here."

Sand stared at the dead deputy.

"I just can't realize it." He shook his head disconsolately. "Dan was a man to ride the river with, and now. . . ."

"Stay here," commanded Flint. "See if you can revive Tom Grant and Nelson—and find out how much money has been stolen. I'm goin' after Red Davis."

Sheriff Flint stepped out of the bank. Townsmen were drifting toward the bank, but he passed them as though he did not even see them. The grim set of his jaw, his direct, thrusting manner made it plain that they had best get out of his way without questioning him.

At the hotel, Flint turned in, loosening the guns in his holsters. The clerk at the desk, alone there in the lobby, nodded to the sheriff. "Davis in his room?" Flint asked.

"Been there all evening," said the clerk. "At least I ain't seen him come down. It's number ten."

Flint climbed the stairs to the second floor. He found the door with "10" painted on it. Guns in his hands, he kicked the door open.

Red Davis was standing at a washstand, a bottle of hair dye in his hand. He turned, as he saw Flint in the washstand mirror.

"So you did rob the bank and kill a lawman!" Flint's guns covered Davis. "Had yore men stage that fake holdup at the express office, figgerin' I wouldn't notice there was anything wrong at the bank, and that I'd round up a posse and light out of here. You were goin' to dye yore hair black, disguise yoreself, and get out of town while I was gone."

"You've got nothin' on me," Red Davis began. But there was a poster lying on the washstand in front of him—the poster announcing that Red Davis was wanted dead or alive. "I've been right here in my room all evening."

"Have you?" The sheriff looked at the coiled lariet lying on a chair. "Do you always carry yore rope with you when yuh turn in for the night?" Sheriff Flint moved to the window and peered out. "Yuh used that rope to climb down the back of the hotel here. Then yuh robbed the bank and killed one of my deputies."

With the sheriff at the window, Davis' hand streaked for his gun. He fired as the sheriff swung about. But Flint was swaying sideways at the same time.

Davis' bullet plowed into the windowframe. Then the sheriff's guns roared.

Flint aimed for the outlaw's arms—but Davis moved to one side, and a bullet caught him in the heart. He pitched forward on his face, and lay motionless on the floor.

"Dead or alive," Flint muttered, looking at the poster. "I reckon pore Dan Bristol will like it better this way."

With the coming of dawn, Beaver Creek was again peaceful. The Bar K outfit, riding into town during the night, had encountered Davis's five gunslicks. A battle had started, and the waddies had wiped out the outlaws. The money stolen from the bank had been found in a barrel behind the bank. Davis had hidden it there with the obvious intention of picking it up when he left town.

"I reckon it's better yuh killed Davis, Sheriff," agreed Ed Sand, "instead of him going to jail to await hangin'. He'll never be able to talk hisself out of where he is now."

Tired Kidneys Often Bring Sleepless Nights

Doctors say your kidneys contain 15 miles of tiny tubes or filters which help to purify the blood and keep you healthy. When they get tired and don't work right in the daytime, many people have to get up nights. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder. Don't neglect this condition and lose valuable, restful sleep.

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Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills.

(Adv.)

Chandler's gun roared just as Navajo Raine thumbed off a shot from the rocks

BADGE FOR A RANGER

By JACKSON COLE

Fighting Against Insurmountable Odds, Navajo Raine Once More Rides the Trail to End a Renegade's Career of Murder!

NAVAJO RAINE stopped to scan the bulletin board outside Captain Mossman's office.

There was a new "wanted" poster up, bearing the picture of a lean, dark, handsome man with a cruel sardonic twist to the thin lips.

"Gregory Chandler," Navajo Raine read, "alias the Buckeye Kid, alias Bucky Prescott, alias Tip Cassidy an' so on. New one."

If the man was handsome, his career was not. In two years it had included everything from wrecking a train and killing the postal clerk, to shooting down in cold blood a woman and her six-year-old son because the woman had refused him a cheap gold wedding ring when he had held up the ranchhouse.

Raine scowled. "There's a coyote who won't die in bed. I'd sure like to write 'Finish' to that career."

"Well you won't get the chance," a voice said. "I've got more important things for you to do."

The Arizona Ranger let his eyes swivel right.

In the open doorway beyond the bulletin board, the stocky, dynamic figure of Captain Burt Mossman seemed to bustle even when standing still.

"Come on, come on, get in here!" he snapped. "I'm waiting for you."

Raine pushed the beaver hat back on his forehead showing the white line where his sunburn ended, and followed the captain inside.

With his Navajo beaded moccasins, his buckskin vest, long hair and dark face, it was easy to see why Raine was so often mistaken for an Indian.

There were, however, exactly four things about him which spelled "white" rather than "red." Two were the matched twin sixshooters which Indians did not carry, and the other two were a pair of strange green eyes, very different from the beady black eyes of the Indian.

The sixguns, with their turquoise-studded butts—a gift of the Navajo who had raised him from a youngster when his father had been shot down and himself left to starve—were a part of the legend of Navajo Raine. They were an identification more potent than the badge of the Rangers. To every man, woman and child in Arizona territory they were the symbol of Navajo Raine, the badge of law and order.

Captain Mossman fished a cigar out of his vest and snapped off the tip with a click of his strong teeth.

"What's this about Chandler?" he demanded.

Raine shrugged.

"Nothin'. I just thought, reading about his illustrious career, that there goes a man who needs killin' mighty bad."

"Let the local sheriffs worry about Chandler," Mossman said, brushing the whole business away. "I got something important for you. Riding herd on one hundred thousand dollars of Uncle Sam's yellowbacks. They're bound for the Indian agent at Santa Rosa to buy beef for the reservation Injuns."

"Didn't those ranchers ever hear of checks? That's a powerful lot of cash to be totin' over the—"

"They're old-fashioned," Mossman put in, "and broke. This is the first money they've seen this year and they need it bad—and quick. Now here's your program: Ride down to Andalusia, identify yourself to the sheriff and the express agent and wait for the money to come in, which it will by train. Then you and the sheriff will take it to the agent at Santa— What's the mater?"

Like a big cat, Raine slid noiselessly to his feet. His eyes turned toward the open window, beyond which was the bright hot sunlight of an Arizona day. With swift silent strides he was across the floor, fingers touching the turquoise butt of his gun. He shoved his head out the window.

The street was quiet, drowsing under the warm benediction of the sun. A dozen yards away a puncher sauntered idly down the walk, presenting only his blue-shirted back. As he turned the corner the sun flashed from silver conchas on his belt. Otherwise, no one was in sight.

"'Smatter?" Mossman demanded. "Someone out there?"

Raine drew his head back.

"Thought I heard something," he admitted. "But I reckon it was just a waddy goin' by."

"You're gettin' jumpy," said Mossman. "Well, this job will be a vacation for you. Nothin' to it."

Navajo Raine remembered those words as he pulled up over a rise in the desert road and saw Andalusia, five miles away. The little 'dobe village was strung out along the dark line of a creek bed shadowed by green mesquite trees. From the east a thin line of steel glimmered in the blinding sun, marking the railroad. Somewhere off to the west was the Indian reservation and the town of Santa Rosa, where the Indian agent had his office.

A SHORT distance down the road, Navajo Raine saw the crumbling walls of an abandoned ranch. There was a well outside with a weathered windlass and bucket. In expectation of water, he touched up his horse and rode forward.

There were horse tracks about the adobe coping of the well; his Indian training made him spot them immediately. With the caution of a man who had been both hunter and hunted in his active life, he drew rein and sat his horse quietly, using his eyes and ears.

The desert, which to so many seemed like a bare and stricken wilderness, actually teemed with life. A jack rabbit thumped out a message somewhere in the chaparral. From a mesquite limb a flycatcher sailed out, speared an insect in mid-air and made a graceful loop back to the tree branch. An oriole made a black and yellow flash through the air. On the ground a small banded snake seemed to stop and listen as a cactus wren chattered busily behind its barricade of deadly cholla spears.

The noises seemed ordinary and peaceful enough. Raine's attention turned to the well. It was deep, but dry. And the windlass was crumbling from long disuse. He bent over to look down the dark aperture—and heard the unmistakable hiss of a rope whipping through the air behind him.

Navajo's instinctive reaction was to throw himself down along the neck of his horse. But he was too late. A hard-flung loop whipped around his shoulders, settled down over his arms and started to draw tight.

With unmatched speed, the Ranger's hands flashed to his twin guns. He actually got them clear of the holsters before the tightening rope jerked him back. One gun exploded to slam its lead into the unresisting sand.

"Get him!" a voice yelled.

Navajo was yanked violently out of the saddle. He hit the ground with a smash that took away his breath, but he hung on to his guns. Twisting as agilely as a snake, he caught a blurred impression of two men swinging around the corner of the crumbling

adobe wall of the ruined house. He fought to bring his gun to bear. But just then the sixgun in the hand of one of the men exploded with a flash that blew the whole sky up in a red flare.

Someone had dropped a curtain across the world. Raine was muffled in its thick folds, blind, choking, with the taste of sand in his mouth. Somewhere beyond his ken there was a persistent, irritating noise. Gradually he perceived it was a voice, or more than one. Then he could even make out words.

". . . sure him. See them guns? Badge enough for an Arizona Ranger."

"Has he cashed in?"

"Sure looks dead."

"All right, dump him in the well. Here, gimme a hand."

There was feeling in his body too, for he was conscious of hands wrenching at him. There was a sense of motion. Something rough scraped across his chest.

Memory tugged at his torpid senses. The well—something rough. That was the adobe coping around it. He was going headfirst into the well!

His mind was scarcely clear enough to understand exactly, to think of the broken neck that would be his if he went down that dark shaft. It was only blind instinct that made him reach and grab as he slid over the coping.

His fingers closed on the bucket. The next instant his body went down into space and the old windlass screamed in protest as the rope paid out.

It was perhaps twenty feet to the bottom, and the rope, which slowed him up and turned his body so that he landed feet first instead of head first, saved his life. Even so, the jar of landing sprawled him out on the bottom and sent flaming spears of pain through his skull. Paradoxically, it cleared his mind.

Voices came down to him, sounding thin and far away.

"Hey, he ain't cashed in! See him grab the rope?"

"Here, give me that!"

The severed end came down on him.

"There, he can stay down there now, dead or alive."

"Mebbe he's got a knife or something."

"What of it? That well's drilled in solid limestone almost as hard as marble. I'd like to see him get out. Besides, there's a storm coming up. Maybe he'll drown, I hope. Come on!"

The curtain came down again for Navajo Raine.

He was dreaming that the Spaniards were invading Arizona through Mexico when he awoke with the thunderous roar of cannon in his ears. He felt weak and sick and there was pain in every muscle of his body, but his mind and vision were clear. Lying on his back he could see straight up the round shaft of the well to a slate gray sky. The cannon were still booming.

Suddenly a flaming spear of dazzling white light split the sky and the world rocked to the stunning reverberations of thunder. The storm had come.

Rain came with a rush. He heard it drumming fiercely on the earth above and it came down liberally into the well and sprinkled his face. It felt cool and refreshing. Carefully, he got to his feet. The smashed bucket and the useless coils of rope were down there with him.

An examination of the well showed that it had been drilled down into layers of solid limestone. Testing the walls with his knife Raine found they were indeed as hard and impregnable as marble. He put his knife away.

His own hurts, he discovered, aside from bruises produced by the plunge down the well, were confined to a rather deep crease above his right ear. Apparently concussion of the bullet had knocked him out, for, so far as he could tell, it had not struck or fractured the bony structure. Which was sheer luck.

He tied up the wound with a spare bandanna.

THE rain was coming down heavily now and the bottom of the well was beginning to get mushy. He realized that apart from the insignificant amount coming down the shaft, water would be soon coming in rapidly from the underground springs or seepage that fed the well.

He upended the bucket and sat down on it, counteracting its tendency to collapse by propping it against the wall. Then he leaned back and waited.

Overhead, the lightning died away and the thunder rolled itself off over the mountains, while the rain dwindled and died. The brief desert storm was over. But there were new noises now. The once-dry arroyos roared with muddy water. There were tricklings and splashings and little stealthy sounds of dropping water. The limestone walls about him oozed tiny streams from a hundred places and water crept through a thousand hidden folds to rise higher and higher about his boots.

He propped his feet against the wall to keep them out of the wet and continued to wait with all the stoic patience of an Indian.

Faster and faster the water rose. As it drained into the surface above, the under layers became saturated and the long unused channels opened up. The little streams on the walls became larger, and the tide rose more swiftly. When it finally lapped over the bucket Raine gave up the unequal fight to keep his legs dry.

Now he stood in water above his knees,

feeling his toes squish around inside his boots. And still he waited patiently. But, curiously enough, there was a little smile on his lips, and his face was not the face of a man who waits for death.

The water was making a cold ring about his shoulders when Navajo Raine sighed with satisfaction and once again took out his pocket knife. . . .

Sheriff Ben Turner of Andalusia was expecting Navajo Raine, and his eyes lighted up as the big man in the buckskin vest stepped through the doorway of his office. Behind him was a smaller man, a puncher with a dark Latin face, wearing a Mexican sombrero, a blue shirt and a wide cowhide belt that sparkled with silver conchas.

"Howdy," said the sheriff experimentally.

The stranger turned piercing black eyes on him. But before he could answer, the sheriff's deputy, "Beanpole" Adams, yipped excitedly and unfolded his six-foot-length like a jackknife from his chair.

"That's him, Sheriff! See them turquoise butts?" His finger jabbed at the matched sixguns riding the low-slung holsters on the big man's thighs. Silver and gems caught the light and glowed as though alive. "That's the badge of Navajo Raine!"

The sheriff's face cleared and he got to his feet, putting out his hand.

"That's so. I'm proud to know yuh, Raine. I'd allowed you looked more like an Injun, from the stories I've heard, if you'll excuse my sayin' so."

The big man smiled with a flash of teeth.

"Reckon those stories got me mixed up with my side-kick here," he said in a deep voice. "Sheriff, shake hands with Mexican Joe, the slipperiest cuss west of the Mississippi. He's got ears like a hoot owl, can track a butterfly through a field of clover an' split the edge of a playing card across a room with his knife."

"Right handy man to ride the river with," the sheriff said doubtfully. "Never heard tell of you havin' a pardner, Raine."

"Most of what you hear about me ain't so," the big man answered easily. "Penalty of becoming a legend in your own lifetime, Sheriff."

They all laughed at that. Beanpole Adams guffawed the loudest and slapped his thigh explosively, then suddenly stopped and looked puzzled, wondering what he was laughing at.

"Glad yuh got here, Raine," the sheriff said. "The money is due on the seven-ten tonight. We'll put it in the safe overnight an' ride out of here first thing tomorrow morning. I'll rest a heap easier knowin' yuh're here and on the job."

"Fine," the Ranger said. "I'll meet you here about twenty minutes before train time, Sheriff. If Joe an' me hurries we can beat this storm comin' up, and grab a bite to eat with some to spare. See yuh later."

The screen door slapped behind them as the first rumble of thunder pounded in from the west.

"He's some hombre, ain't he?" Beanpole exulted. "We'll be safer'n a troop of cavalry totin' that cash money—"

"Yuh're stayin' here tomorrow," the sheriff cut in.

"Aw, Sheriff—" Thunder drowned out his protest, and before he had a chance to finish what he was saying, the sheriff went right on talking.

"Somebody's got to stay here—we can't all go gallivantin' off an' leave the town without a peace officer. Suppose somethin' happens while we're all away? Now shut up and do like yuh're told!"

By the time the Ranger and his silent, dark companion came back, the storm had rolled away, leaving only muddy streets and puddles. The four men strolled down to the station together and watched the seven-ten steam in. From the express car a strongbox was lifted down while the guard stood by with both barrels of a sawed-off shotgun cocked and ready. As soon as Sheriff Turner had signed for the money, they carried the box to the express office and saw it safely locked into the big steel safe.

"That ought to hold it overnight," the sheriff said tensely. "Now I'll see yuh at six sharp, Raine. At my office."

"Keno," said the Ranger. "We'll be ready."

Turner and Beanpole walked back to the office. There was the faintest shadow on the sheriff's face.

"Sure heard that Raine looked plumb like a Navajo," he muttered to himself. "But pshaw, that's him all right. Them guns alone. . . ."

BEANPOLE ADAMS, holding down the sheriff's office in solitary splendor, looked without interest at the morning's mail, then gave the whole thing up. The morning sun, slanting through the dusty window, made him drowsy and he leaned back in the creaky old swivel chair.

A freight wagon stopped outside. Footsteps sounded on the porch and the door flapped open. A big man, hatless, ducked his bandaged head through the doorway. He wore a buckskin vest, and his face was dark as an Indian's.

"You Sheriff Turner?" he demanded.

Beanpole regarded him through the V formed by his feet on the desk.

"Nup. Deputy Adams.' 'Smatter? You been helt up? I'm in charge since Sheriff Turner's out with the Ranger."

"Ranger? What Ranger?"

"Navajo Raine," said Beanpole, getting his feet down with some difficulty.

The big man with the bloody bandage came around the desk like a cyclone and

hauled the deputy to his feet.

"What'd he look like?"

"Huh? Why he's a little runt, gray where he ain't bald, tough as rawhide—"

"Not Turner! The Ranger!"

"Leggo me! What's eatin' on yuh? Who're you, anyway!"

"I'm Navajo Raine. And I'm tryin' to find out who passed himself off as me!"

"You're—" Beanpole's mouth dropped open. "You're loco, stranger. I know this feller was Raine. Them two sixguns with the turquoise butts—" His eyes fell to the empty holsters on the stranger's legs.

"Guns can be stolen," Raine said crisply. He dug into his pocket, produced a badge. "Did he show you one of these?"

"Uh, no. We didn't ask. Soon's we saw them guns—"

"Or this?" He took a letter, still damp, from a buttoned pocket and flipped it open. It was addressed to Sheriff Turner and signed by Burt Mossman, Captain of Rangers.

"Oh, me!" Beanpole quavered. He sank into the chair. "I don't feel so good. Sheriff Turner is out with—hey, how do I know you ain't lyin'?"

"Haven't I shown you enough?" Raine's eye fell on the unopened mail. With a sudden thought he began tearing open envelopes. A poster fell out of one. The face of Gregory Chandler looked up at him.

"Great balls of fire!" Beanpole gasped. "That's him—that's Navajo Raine!"

"That's only his latest name," the Ranger said grimly. "Where are they?"

"The-they're gone. The money come in last night on the seven-ten and they took it this morning. They're ridin' to Santa Rosa. Sheriff's alone with him and that little Mexican Joe."

"Mexican Joe? Who's that?"

"Little feller come with this—this Chandler. Part Injun, I reckon. Said he was lightning with a knife. Wore a blue shirt, belt with silver conchas."

"Silver conchas." Memory prodded Navajo. He saw again a blue-shirted back and flashing belt as a cowboy strolled toward the corner—a cowboy who a moment before might have been under the window when he, Raine, got his instructions from Burt Mossman.

So that was it. Chandler had a partner, or aide, who picked up useful information by hanging around places where it might be forthcoming, and transmitted them promptly. Then Chandler could act with sure knowledge.

That was the reason for the man's great success and quick rise on the owlhoot trails. And that was how he knew to wait for the Ranger outside of Andalusia, to dispose of him and take the famous guns that marked him more surely than his face.

"Come on!" Beanpole said. Gone was his vacillation, his simpleness. The prospect of action steadied him, gave new strength and dignity to his gangling frame. "I'll get yuh a horse an' a gun, Raine. We've got to ride!"

In a few minutes they were racing out of Andalusia toward the purple mountains where the road climbed up to Santa Rosa.

"Sheriff ain't got a chance—with them

"They Killed Him! And I Been Shot, Too—Get a Doctor, Quick!"

THAT was Speedy's agonized cry after the flash of guns in the hotel lobby and the murder of Telluride Jim Gore, old prospector. Tombstone ran outside, shoving men away from the doorway. He raced down the street for about a block, where he stopped short.

"What am I runnin' for?" he said aloud. "I don't know where the doctor lives."

So Tombstone ran back, to find the doctor already there. Telluride Jim Gore was very dead. But Speedy had no other injury except that occasioned by the breaking of a bottle of red ink in his pocket, which had made him think he was bleeding. Everybody kidded Speedy about that—but it wasn't long before some serious gun menace stalked him and Tombstone, too!

Every page of TROUBLE TRAILERS IN TOMAHAWK, by W. C. Tuttle, packs both thrills and laughs! This novelet brings you the further adventures of those hilarious range detectives, Tombstone and Speedy—and you'll enjoy every bit of it!

COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

two lobos!" Beanpole panted. "We've gotta cut them off afore they do their devilment!"

"Know a short cut?"

Beanpole grinned at him.

"Was borned and raised in this country. Know shortcuts the sheriff never heard of. We can get ahead of them all right. If only they don't pull nothin' before we do!"

Down the flat they raced. The road wound between forests of giant cactus and through chaparral thickets. The wind ballooned their shirts and flattened the brim of Beanpole's hat back against his forehead.

Where the trail began to rise and twist into the hills and the cactus and greasewood gave way to cedars and pine, Beanpole left the road and struck off confidently on a dim cow path. Navajo Raine followed him at full gallop, his superb mastery of his horse enabling him to take a strange and difficult trail as confidently as the man who knew it from boyhood. Beanpole, looking back anxiously to see if Raine was following, grinned his admiration over his shoulder.

THEY hammered down rocky arroyos and clambered up steep crumbling banks, splashed through creeks and climbed long slopes slippery with pine needles. Stopping to breathe the horses, Beanpole pointed out the road twisting below them.

"It winds plumb around this mountain, takin' the easy way. We're goin' around the other side the hard way, an' meet it comin' back. Twelve miles by road, about three this way. Mebbe kill us an' the horses, but we'll get there."

Part of the way was so steep that they climbed up on foot, desperately pulling the jittery horses after them. An hour of this back-breaking, killing pace found them soaking wet, their knees turned to rubber, their hearts pounding and their ears roaring in the thin air.

They came up over a ridge strewn with boulders bigger than a house, and saw the road below. Navajo's breath hissed between his lips as he leaned forward sharply.

Three horsemen trotted below them.

"In time!" he said. "Come on!"

The riders passed them, trotting on easily. They mounted and began the steep descent. By the time they had slipped and scrambled to the road, the three ahead were out of sight around the turn.

Beanpole would have set off at a gallop, but Navajo Raine caught his arm.

"Wait! If we come roaring up, they'll take one look at me, know the game's ended and start shooting. Likely they'll shoot the sheriff first so they can grab the box an' make a run for it."

"That's so," Beanpole said, worried. "What'll we do?"

"You ride on fast and catch them—alone. Start talkin' an' try to get the drop on them, or at least attract their attention. Just a second is all I need. I can squeeze off two shots in a second!"

"I reckon!" Beanpole gulped. "I'll try, Raine!"

He clapped spurs to his horse and galloped away. Navajo Raine followed him swiftly. As Beanpole disappeared around the bend, Raine slowed up cautiously, screening himself in the boulders at the edge of the road.

It was well he did so. For from the rocks he could get a clear view of the roadway around the bend. The three riders had stopped when they heard the beat of hoofs behind them. They had wheeled to look back and were staring as Beanpole galloped toward them.

"Hey, Sheriff, wait for me!" Beanpole shouted.

Navajo Raine saw the little man with the blue shirt and concha-studded belt exchange a quick look with his partner. Tense, wary as coyotes, they sensed trouble instantly in the unexpected pursuit by the deputy. Hands dropped to gun-butts.

"Beanpole! Anything wrong?" Sheriff Turner cried.

"Plenty!" Beanpole wracked his brain for something to say. Attract their attention, Navajo Raine had said. Well, he would, he'd attract their attention to himself! "Sheriff, they're fakes! We've been took! That lobo there ain't no more Navajo Raine than I am!"

For a second all three were frozen to their saddles. Sheriff Turner's face held a look of disbelief and consternation. Then Gregory Chandler's hand swept up like the arm of a well-oiled machine, carrying his six-gun clear of leather. Like a shadow, Mexican Joe made a draw. And matching him was Beanpole's stab for his gun. Only Sheriff Turner hampered by the box he carried before him on the saddle, seemed unable to decide what to do.

Chandler's turquoise-mounted gun roared just as Navajo Raine thumbed off a shot from the rocks. On Turner's face appeared shock and amazement. He went out of the saddle backward, sprawling in the road as his horse reared in fright and began to plunge wildly.

There was panic on the narrow roadway with guns blazing and horses squealing, fighting, bucking. The plunging animals made shooting uncertain, even at such close quarters. Navajo Raine, charging swiftly into battle, was in a better position for shooting. His second shot toppled Mexican Joe out of his saddle.

Chandler's horse, rearing high, drove into Beanpole's mount and the lanky deputy dropped his gun in the effort to grab a handhold. Raine saw the outlaw's teeth

flash in savage satisfaction as he shoved Beanpole back and wheeled to meet the oncoming Ranger.

Their guns roared. Raine came on, straight into the muzzle of his own turquoise-mounted weapons. Lead screamed about him. He was ten jumps away when Chandler rose up in his stirrups and crashed backward over the cantle into the dust of the road.

NAVAJO pulled his horse to a sliding stop. The silence was thick and strange after the roar of the big Colts. Beanpole fought his horse down and dropped off to rush to Sheriff Turner. The sheriff sat up, shaking his grizzled head. He was still holding desperately to the strong-box.

"Looka that," Beanpole said in awe.

There was a hole made by a .45 slug in the stout wooden box. And the slug was inside, imbedded in the tightly packed stacks of bills.

"Never touched yuh, Sheriff. Just knocked yuh outa the saddle."

"What's this all about?" Turner demanded, scrambling up. "Who're you?" he snapped at Raine.

"This is Navajo Raine," Beanpole explained. "The real one."

"What! Then who's that?" He pointed to the twisted form of Chandler.

Silently Raine handed him the reward notice. The sheriff's weather-beaten cheeks flushed as he recognized the picture. His fingers crumpled the poster in mute anger.

"If this had come yesterday instead of today—" he muttered. "How'd this happen, Raine?"

"They drygulched me, stole my guns, left me for dead."

He walked over to Chandler, squatted down and turned the outlaw over on his back. There was a great red stain on the man's shirt. His eyes opened. He looked at Raine, recognized him.

"You're—a—better shot—than me—Ranger," he whispered. "Curse you!"

Navajo rolled a cigarette, got it going and stuck it between Chandler's lips. The outlaw sucked on it gratefully. Turner and Beanpole drifted in close, staring down in dread fascination.

"Not—that I care—now," Chandler said with great effort, "but—how did yuh—"

"How'd I get out of the well?" Raine shrugged. "It was hard limestone, real hard. And I had only a pocket knife. You were pretty sure it was hopeless, eh, Chandler? Well, I reckon it proves an education ain't all wasted. Too bad yuh won't have time, or yuh could read up on Arizona calcite.

"It's peculiar stuff, Chandler. Hard—so hard you'd need a sledge and a star drill to make a mark in it. But it soaks up water like a sponge. And when it's soaked up enough it gets soft, Chandler, soft as cheese. Yuh can cut it with a knife—just like yuh'd cut a slab of cheese!"

Some emotion akin to frustrated fury filled the outlaw's dying eyes.

"It rained while I was layin' down there," Raine went on. "And all the underground springs that fed that well started pouring water in on me. I waited until it got to my shoulders, an' then I tried it. It was like cutting a loaf of bread. I cut steps in that wall and I went up like goin' up a staircase. Then I had to wait all night before a freighter gave me a lift into town in his wagon. Too bad you'll never get a chance to use the information, Chandler."

The outlaw's lips moved. He was trying to say something, all the cold hard viciousness of him revealed in his eyes. And he died that way, trying to speak.

Navajo Raine straightened up wearily.

"That's all, Sheriff," he said. "We'll go on to Santa Rosa and send back for these two. There's a reward for Chandler—I think Beanpole ought to get it for bringing me here in time."

He recovered his turquoise-mounted guns, reloaded them and then slid them back into his holsters.

"These things have become my trademark," he said. "But next time, Sheriff, yuh better ask for more identification."

"If it's all the same to you," Sheriff Turner said, gathering up his reins, "I hope there ain't goin' to be no next time!"

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The Cowboy HAD A WORD for it!

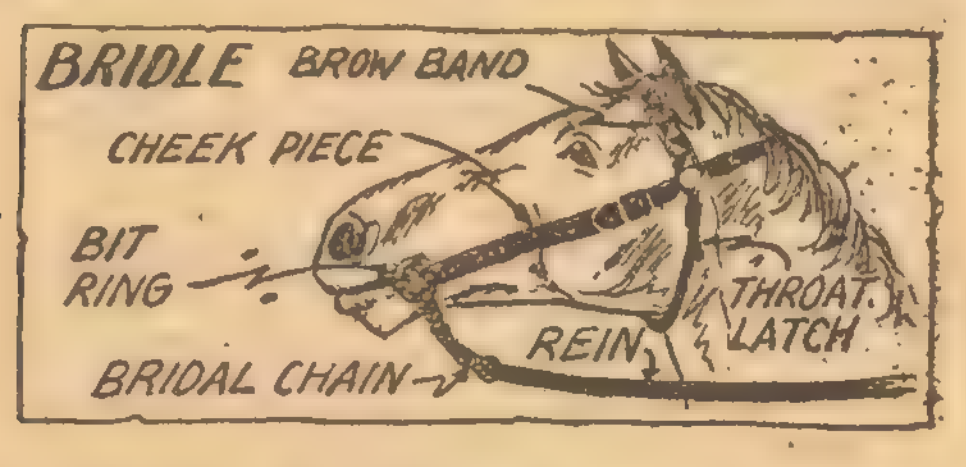
By CHUCK STANLEY

WITH his head crammed full of "saddle facts" after one evening on the rear steps of the bunkhouse talking to the old "mossyhorn" of the ranch, it's not surprising that we should find our "tenderfoot" going back for a lesson on the bridle, and on the lexicon of the horse himself.

Let's pick up the student and the old-time teacher where we left them last time. The "stove-up maverick" with his half-century of range lore sticking out of his gleaming eyes, and marked in the wrinkles of his wind-burned skin, liked nothing better than a willing and appreciative audience.

"Take a 'bridle,' now," he began, moving his corn-cob pipe to one corner of his mouth. "To most folks a bridle is just a bridle, and I ain't talking about weddings, either. But the cowboy had a lot more to say about a bridle than that. Some of them cow-nurses didn't even call it a bridle—they called it a 'freno,' and folks knew what they were talking about, too."

With this bit of information, the old "mossyhorn" went on to point out that a bridle consisted of a "crown-piece," a "brow-band," a "throat-latch," and two "cheek-pieces." The "cheek-pieces" fitted into "bit-rings" which held the "bit." Our "Arbuckle"



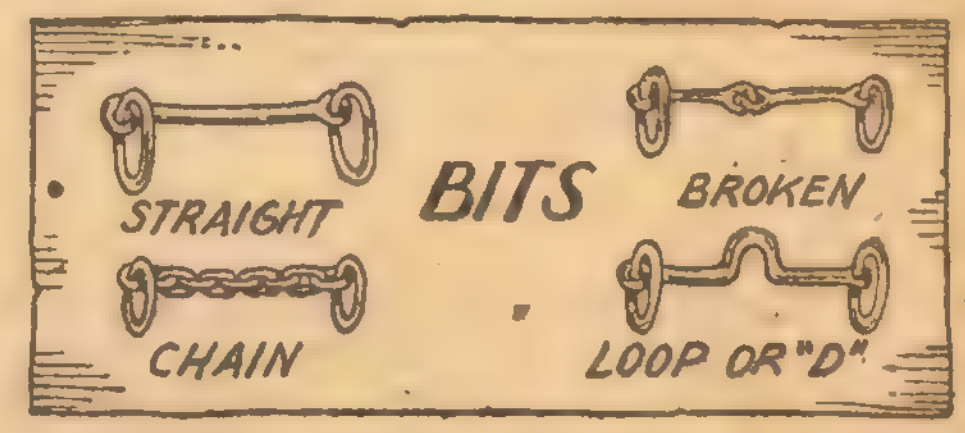
learned that the history of the bit on a bridle went back a good many hundred years to the time when Moorish chieftains, mounted on their Arabian chargers, were thinking seriously of moving across the Straits of Gibraltar and into Spain.

Pity a Horse's Mouth!

Most bits fell into two general classes. One of these was the so-called "humane" bit. This bit generally conveyed the idea that a rider could hurt a horse with it if he wanted to, but the bit itself was harmless. The "caballero" bit was the type that was much crueler, and by tightening the reins on it, a rider could do a good deal of damage to the horse's mouth. Besides these two general classifications, bits also had other descriptive names.

For instance, there was the "chain bit," which consisted of a short length of chain running from one bit ring to the other. The "straight bit," as the name indicates, was merely a straight piece of iron, with small holes at either end for fastening into the bit rings. A combination bit known as a "broken bit" consisted of two short pieces of iron, joined by a chain link or metal swivel in the center.

Generally these types of bits fell into the humane classification. In the other classification, on the cruel side, there was the "ring bit." This was a bit made of a metal ring which passed through the horse's mouth and went around the lower jaw. The "stomach pump" bit was a piece of metal, looking something like a long spike, and which was bent backward at the top. It was about four inches long. This was also known as a "spade bit."



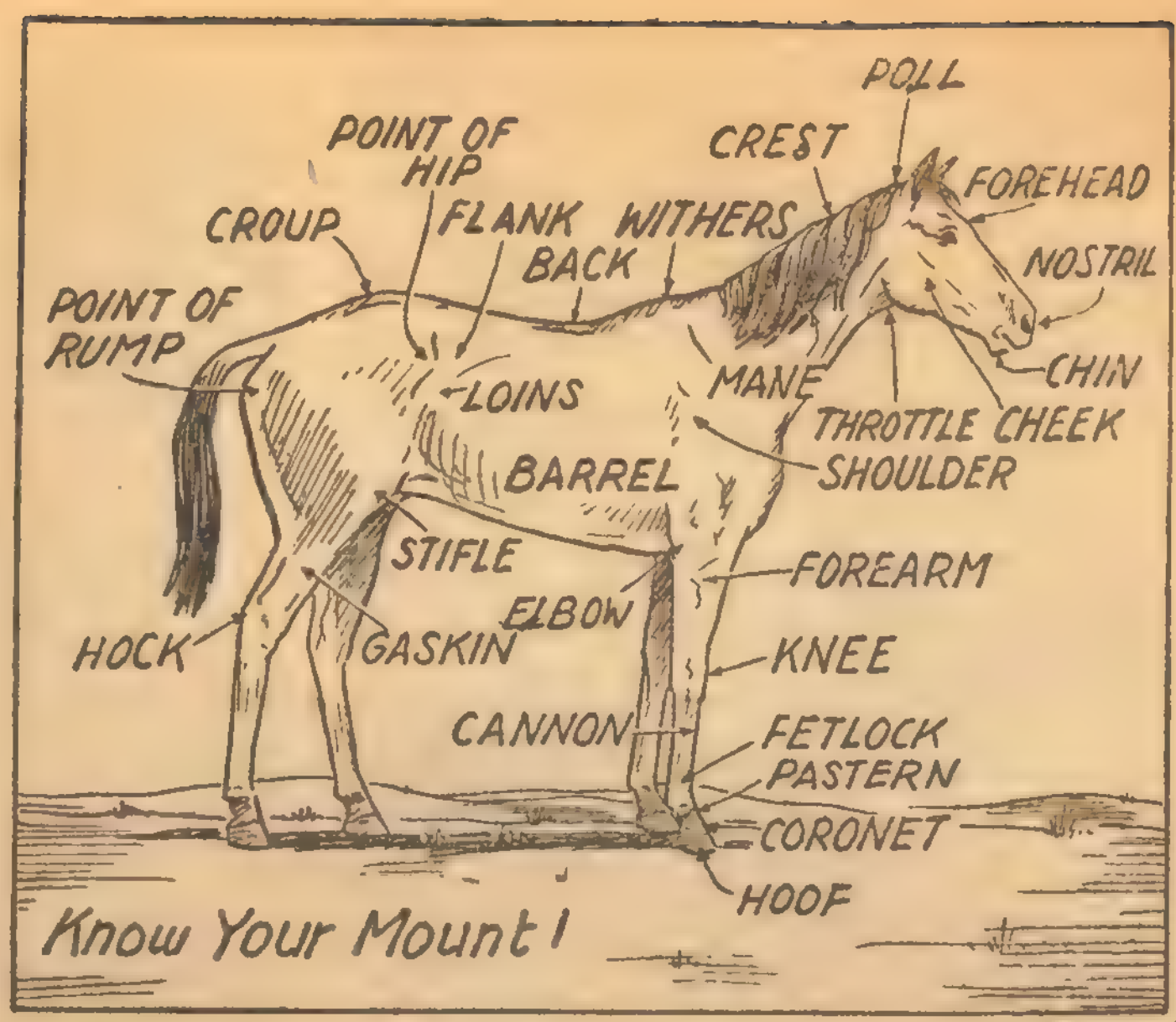
Another one of the bits in this group was the so-called "half-breed bit" which looked something like a croquet wicket or inverted hairpin. This had a hump or curve about two inches above the mouth-piece. The hump served as an axle for a "roller" or "spinner." This "roller" was a vertical spool or wheel which had a broad, fluted rim.

Music as You Ride

Some cowboys who didn't go in for cruel bits, nevertheless took a fancy to "rollers" on their bits, but they had them punched with holes, or shaped like penny whistles, with the result that the movement of the bit bar or the breathing of the horse supplied a musical accompaniment on the cowboy's journey. These musical "rollers" were known as "crickets" because of the chirping sounds they produced.

After delivering himself of this interesting information, the old "mossyhorn" tamped down the dottle in his pipe, and leaned back against the barn wall. The "Arbuckle" was making notes, and also storing odd details in

Our Tenderfoot Now Learns Some Mighty Interesting Facts About Horses, Saddles and Bridles!



the back of his head. When the "maverick's" pipe was drawing to his satisfaction, he reached up on the wall above him and took down a bridle. He passed this over to the "greener."

"See can you show me them parts of the bridle and bit I just told you about," he said. "Then we'll learn a little about the lore of the reins."

The "shorthorn" proved himself an apt pupil, and when he had named the several parts of the bridle already explained to him, the old-timer settled back, and flipped the reins over his knees. In a cloud of smoke, he picked up the next part of his Western lingo subject.

"These here reins," he remarked, "came in two kinds. Some 'rannies' liked to ride with 'open reins.' That means they held the two ends of the reins in each hand. Did the 'waddy' figure he'd feel more comfortable with the reins tied together at the ends, and forming a loop over the horse's mane, he knotted them together, and they were referred to as 'closed reins,' or 'tied reins.'"

"But why did he tie them together?" inquired our "Arbuckle."

"A good many of them weren't just tied together," replied the "mossback." "They were usually plaited together into a whip the 'vaqueros' called a 'ramal.' Did you come from north of the Border where your Spanish wasn't as pure, the whip was called a 'romal' which was the Texican's way of spelling the Spanish word. That 'ramal' word was the Spanish root for the word 'ramification,' meaning 'to branch off.'"

Cowboy Emergency Brakes

The "pilgrim" listened intently as the old-timer went on to explain that a cowboy's reins were attached to a "bit-ring" on either side of the horse's mouth. Some cowboy's preferred to use a "bridle chain." This was a piece of chain five or six inches long, which went from the end of the "bridle rein" to the "bit-ring." Such an arrangement usually made the "bridle rein" leather last longer, because it wasn't so easy for the horse's saliva to wear out the chain as it would with the leather itself.

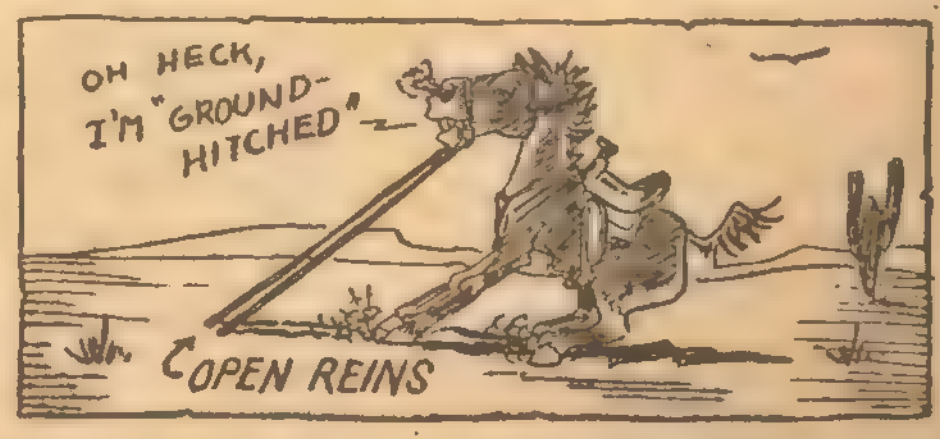
A "quirt" was the name given to some of the "romals" which were attached to the reins. The same name identified the plaited leather whip which a rider sometimes carried attached to his wrist by a thong.

"Which kind of rein did the cowboy prefer?" asked the "Arbuckle."

"Usually he liked the 'open reins' best," replied the "fossil." "There was a good reason for that, too. 'Open reins' were the emergency brakes of the Western cow-pony. Most of them were trained to stand fast when the reins were dragging on the ground. So if a 'waddy' let go of his reins for any reason, he could be sure the horse would stand still. He might be hurt and fall from his horse, or he might have to leave the back of his horse to throw a steer or any one of a dozen other jobs. In such cases 'open reins' would fall to the ground."

A Twister

Our range rookie discovered that the practise of halting a horse with "open reins" dragging on the ground had developed a branch of



Frontier lexicon all its own. Such horses were said to be "ground-hitched," "ground-tied," "tied-to-a-blade of grass," "hitched to a cloud," "tied to the breeze," "hitched to the wind," and other variations.

The old-timer slowed up a bit after this, and the "greener" prodded him on.

"There are a couple of questions I'd like to ask about the 'quirt,'" he said, "and what's a 'tool chest'?"

The "maverick" enjoyed the curiosity of his student, and he had been deliberately holding back some of his information, for just this extra bit of prodding. He was something like the old range bulls that had given him his "mossyhorn" nickname.

"A 'tool-chest' was a kind of bit most cowboys didn't like to talk about, much less see on a horse," he explained. "It was one of the cruelest types of bits, and was made by taking a bit of barbed wire and running it around a horse's lower jaw. Then there was the 'twitch' and the 'war bridle' that came near being in the same class."

Our "Arbuckle" discovered that a "twitch" was a type of combination bridle and hackamore made up of a small loop of cord wound around a stick. The loop was placed around the horse's upper lip, and if the "waddy" wanted to punish the horse for any reason, he merely tightened on the stick or "twitched" it. Another name for the "twitch" was "twister."

The "war bridle" differed from the "twitch" in that it had no stick in it, but merely consisted of a twist of rope running through the mouth and around the lower jaw of the horse. Also in the class with the "twitch" and the "war bridle" was the "ghost cord." This was a length of cord that was fastened around the tongue and across the gums of the horse behind its teeth. From there it went under the lower jaw, and into the rider's hand. You can readily see that if the rider was cruel-minded, he could do plenty of harm to an unbroken animal.

Bad for Buckers

"Quirts had their own particular nomenclature, too," resumed the old "waddy." "Most quirts were made of a long piece of plaited leather. They looked something like the 'cat-o'-nine-tails' of shipboard days. The handle or 'butt' of the quirt was also known as the 'stock,' and was generally about a foot long. The 'lash' was made up of three or four heavy, but loose thongs of flexible leather. The 'butt' end was frequently filled with buckshot or balled lead, and 'buckers' used it to whip down a horse about to 'pinwheel' or fall over backward on its rider. The 'loop' was the pliable bit of leather forming a thong to go around the rider's wrist, or for fastening the quirt to the saddle-horn or any other part of the rider's equipment."

The old "mossback" elaborated to some extent, and pointed out that the word "quirt" derived from the Mexican-Spanish word, *"cuerta"* meaning whip, and went still further back to the pure Castilian Spanish word *"cuerda"* meaning "cord."

One curious variation of the Border name for the "quirt" was the "quisto." Lexicographers, explaining the origin of the word, claimed that it was derived from the fact that Cortez and his soldiers ruled Mexico by the whip, and that the word *"conquistadores"* which is usually translated as "conquerors" really meant "those who rule by the whip," with the words *"con"* (with) and *"quista"* (whip) supplying the roots of the word.

Some Frontier students shared the belief of our "pilgrim" that a "quirt" and a "cow-whip" were one and the same thing. The old "mosshorn" cleared up this misunderstanding without delay. The "cow-whip" was also known as a "bull-whip," or a "driving-whip," and found its uses on wagon trains, freight trains, and in herding cattle. These whips were usually long, flexible whips with leather or shot "poppers" on the end, and they were used to stir up cattle or ox teams to get them moving, rather than for lashing or driving purposes.

As a matter of fact a good "cow-whip popper" or "bull-whip popper" never had to touch the hide of his herd or team in order to keep it moving. His skill in this direction was a guarantee of his worth to the ranch owner or freight team boss.

"What happened on the range, if you came up with a wild horse and didn't have a bridle?" our "greenhorn" wanted to know.

In an Emergency

The old "mossback" replaced the bridle on the hook in the "tack room" behind them, and took down a curious looking "head-stall" made of rope.

"I'm glad you asked me that," replied the old-timer. "Because there will be times when you'll have your rope with you, but won't be able to get hold of a bridle. Them's the times you'll want to know how to make a 'hackamore.'"

With this introduction the "stove-up waddy" explained that the name for the "hackamore" was another word that had come from the Spanish. South of the Border the word was *"jaquima."* The ordinary "halter" which went over the horse's nose and around his ears and under his throat was the foundation for the "hackamore" but it didn't have any reins attached to it. Instead, there was a "leading rope" fashioned from a length of the "lass-rope," or made up of a separate piece of rope with a ring or a "snap-catch" to connect the two.

The "Arbuckle" reflected on this picture of a "tenderfoot" cowboy and a "tenderfoot" horse coming together with only a "hackamore" between them. Then he said:

"Looks to me as though you wouldn't have no control over the 'proddy' wild horses with a 'hackamore.' What did you do in a case like that?"

"That's where the 'bosal' came in handy," explained the old-timer.

He went on to point out that a "bosal" was a make-shift bit, but instead of going into the horse's mouth it went around the horse's head above the mouth, and over the nostrils. Thus it worked to cut off the horse's wind, rather than nipping his tongue as a bit would do.

When a Horse Can't Breathe—He's Good

The "bosal" might be made of different materials. Some of them were metal rings. Others were twisted out of strips of leather, while some were merely rawhide thongs. The type of "hackamore" using a "bosal" had rope or leather reins, and when the cowboy tight-

(Concluded on page 77)

"You're wrong, Sanders," said Alamo. "I've got another shot here."

SIX-GUN SIGNATURE

By REEVE WALKER

Pony Express Rider Alamo Paige Gambles with Death When He Dares to Duel Bern Sanders, Notorious Killer of the Range!

MY NAME is John Russell. I was twenty years old and headed for California that September day in 1860—the day I met Alamo Paige. My reason for heading to California? Let us say it was to prove my worth—if there was any worth to prove.

At the time I was a scatter-brained, harum-scarum adolescent with an exaggerated conception of my own abilities.

I was not completely stupid, however. At Kansas City I realized I was being followed.

"Is that gentleman a friend of yours, sir?" the table steward on the river packet Golden Star asked me.

He indicated a heavy-set, broad-shouldered man with sideburns, near the cigar counter. He was dressed in black serge. A handsome sapphire glittered in his stock and he wore a massive gold ring. There was, it seemed to me, something familiar about him, but I could not place it.

"No," I said. "Why did you ask?"

"Well, sir, he's been watching you." Then, embarrassed, the steward started off.

"Just a minute," I said. "Find out the gentleman's name." I slid a silver dollar into his hand.

That, I told myself triumphantly, was a shrewd move.

But when the steward brought me the information, I was no wiser than before. Bern Sanders? The name meant nothing to me.

Thinking back, I remembered noticing him at St. Louis, while boarding the Golden Star. At Omaha occurred the first of those strange events which showed something was wrong.

We unloaded some goods at Omaha and I came down the gangplank for a look at the Nebraska metropolis.

While making a detour around a pile of wooden cases, I heard hoarse shouts—

"Look out!"

A rope hissed its warning of danger. Instinctively I leaped for safety. Behind me a huge wooden case, which had been suspended overhead, smashed to the spot where I'd been a moment before. The case burst open, scattering hardware in all directions.

I trembled with fright. Negro roustabouts came running toward the spot and the first mate hurried down the gangplank. Just then I caught a glimpse of the handsome dark face of Bern Sanders, as he slunk away.

"Are you hurt, sir?" the first mate asked.

"No, I'm all right. What happened?"

"A rope slipped. Can't understand it, sir. A fool deckhand must have been careless."

I shrugged—and walked aft.

AS A matter of fact I was scared. It may have been an accident, but I had a feeling it wasn't. It seemed fantastic to suspect Bern Sanders, but what was he doing up there on the deck just then? Could he have loosened the rope? The idea appeared fantastic. Why should a stranger have designs on my life?

I found no answer to that in the muddy, dreary streets of Omaha. After dark I returned to the steamboat. The stars were coming out and some river birds—sandpipers, I think—were flying overhead. A few lights from the boat threw dancing reflections on the yellow water.

I stopped to light a cigar. As the match flared I had the sudden unpleasant thought of how well illuminated was my face and what a perfect target I should make. The thought startled me so that I dropped the cigar case.

As I bent to pick it up, something sang in the air above my head. There was a solid thump in the wooden packing case next to me and a vibrant metallic humming like that of a plucked guitar string.

Frozen in my bent position I turned my head slightly. An evil, gleaming bowie knife was buried deeply in the packing case.

No sound came from the shadows about me, although music and laughter seeped from the salon of the Golden Star. Still bent over, I scurried aboard the ship.

In my cabin, I made plans. There was no question now that someone was deliberately seeking my life. The falling case could have been an accident, but the thrown knife ended all my doubts. The falling case no longer appeared to be an accident. Though I had no real evidence, I felt sure Bern Sanders was to blame for both occurrences.

I made it my business to appear on deck the next day. I saw Sanders and he saw me. Then, after we had left a small settlement on the North Platte, I squeezed myself through the ample porthole of my cabin and swam for shore.

It was early evening, but already dark. The only lights came from bonfires on the river bank. I am a strong swimmer and made it all right. A short time later, dripping wet, I crawled out on the bank and watched the lights of the Golden Star disappear up the river. The next morning I was safely aboard the stage bound for Julesburg.

All my possessions were aboard the steamboat with the exception of the clothes I was wearing. Also I possessed a few hundred dollars in a money-belt, and a new Colt repeating revolver which I had bought in the town. This Colt was an ingenious modern device loaded with cap and ball and which would shoot six times before needing reloads. The storekeeper had sold me a box of reloads and I felt much relieved.

That relief was short lived for I had underestimated Bern Sanders. Our first day's journey passed uneventfully.

At Paxton, on the South Platte, a new passenger got on and we had the coach to ourselves. He was a short and slender youth, with a suggestion of wiry strength about him. He wore a buckskin shirt, fringed like an Indian's and a belt with a huge six-shooter. His flat crowned beaver hat was perched jauntily on his head and his face was burned a deep brick red.

This much I saw at a glance and paid no more attention. The stage lurched onward, swinging around curves amid a cloud of dust.

Sometime later, above the rumble of the wheels, I heard the driver curse luridly. The coach came to a violent halt, tossing the passenger and myself in a heap. Before we cold unscramble ourselves, there was a rush of hoofs and the door was yanked open.

Bern Sanders appeared behind a leveled pistol. His eyes took me in, then flicked to my fellow passenger. I saw the flash of recognition in both faces.

"Bern Sanders!" said the buckskin garbed passenger.

"Step out, Paige," said Sanders. "Keep your hands high. I have no quarrel with you. My advice is to mind your own business. Frenchy—" he snapped over his shoulder—"take Alamo Paige's gun."

Another man moved up, a swarthy half-breed. Outside, the driver remained discreetly quiet.

"I'll keep my gun, Sanders," Alamo Paige said quietly.

"You'll give it to Frenchy or take a slug

between your eyes!" Sanders said.

Alamo Paige glanced at me. I saw that he had sized up the whole situation at once. He knew I had been marked for slaughter.

"Step out," Sanders said to me.

With folded arms, I scrambled out. I had a reason for folding my arms. Sanders had failed to notice the new pistol in my belt. The half breed never gave me a glance. Apparently they were contemptuous of me as a source of danger. Both of them were watching Alamo Paige, keeping their guns trained upon him. The driver sat looking down upon this with an air of detachment.

No one noticed as I whipped the new Colt pistol from my belt, thumbed back the hammer as the storekeeper had shown me, and let it fall. In my excitement I forgot to aim at either of the two holdup men.

THERE was a roar like a cannon blast. The pistol kicked violently. I hit nothing of course, but the effect was sensational.

Bern Sanders leaped backward from the coach door. Frenchy wheeled, swinging his gun at me. For a second I stared into its hungry mouth. But inside the coach, moving with unbelievable speed, Alamo Paige drew and fired.

Frenchy jerked sideways as though pushed by a heavy hand. As he crumpled to the ground, Sanders threw a hasty shot at the coach and leaped upon his horse. As Alamo Paige sprang out of the coach, ready for another shot, Sander's horse plunged forward. It struck Paige and sent him spinning. Then horse and rider went whipping around a bend and disappeared.

I ran forward and helped Alamo Paige to his feet. He had retained his grip on the revolver in spite of being knocked down. He brushed me aside, impatiently, went over, and looked up at the driver of the coach.

"Talk fast," he said, raising the big pistol. "Where do you stand in this?"

The driver shrugged.

"My job's drivin', not fightin'," he answered. "You know that, Alamo. Come on, gents. Get aboard. We're late."

Alamo Paige motioned me into the coach. Then he and the driver hauled the dead body of Frenchy on top the coach, and secured it. This time I found I was not affected as much by the incident as I had been by the bowie knife adventure. My outlook was changing.

Alamo Paige got in, slammed the door and the coach rumbled away. He began reloading the big Colt revolver. Thus reminded, I drew out my own stock of cap and ball and fell to work on my own gun, filling the empty chamber.

Paige interrupted me. He tapped me on the back of the hand.

"No," he said. "Five, not six."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You load only five chambers in the cylinder and keep yore hammer on the empty one. Like mine, see?"

"But that's silly," I protested. "Why have a six-shooter with only five shots?"

He smiled, revealing his white and even teeth.

"You lose a shot," he admitted. "But it's a heap safer to keep yore hammer restin' on an empty. Those caps are mighty touchy. You bump your holster against somethin', hit the hammer and boom, you end up wearin' a wooden leg. Only a little jar is all you need."

"I see," I said thoughtfully. Carefully I withdrew the charge from one cylinder, making my six-shooter into a five-shooter.

The loading accomplished, Alamo Paige sat back and looked at me.

"Out here, a man's business is his own business," he said. "But if you feel like it, you can tell me why Bern Sanders was after your scalp."

"I haven't the faintest idea," I said. "I never saw him before—well, before Kansas City. I think he's responsible for at least two other attempts upon my life. Who is he, Mr. Paige?"

"Just call me Alamo," the youngster said "It sounds more natural."

"Alamo, then. My name is John Russell."

"Yes, John. Sure, I know Bern Sanders. He's trouble shooter for the Great Bear Stage Line."

"Why, this is the Great Bear Line. You mean he held up one of his own stages to get at me?"

"Looks like it. You see, a trouble shooter is a mighty salty hombre—got to be. His job is to keep the stage runnin' in spite of blizzard, Injuns, bandits, drought, fire or flood. Most times he's got to act sudden and mean. It takes a killer to hold the job."

"But why me?" I asked. "I still don't understand. He followed me from Kansas City." Briefly I outlined the events on the Golden Star and my attempted escape.

"He's too old a hand to be fooled thataway," Alamo said. "He or Frenchy who was prob'bly on board but kept out of sight, discovered you were gone, got off the boat and tracked you easy enough. Then it was simple to get horses and catch up. Where you headed for now?"

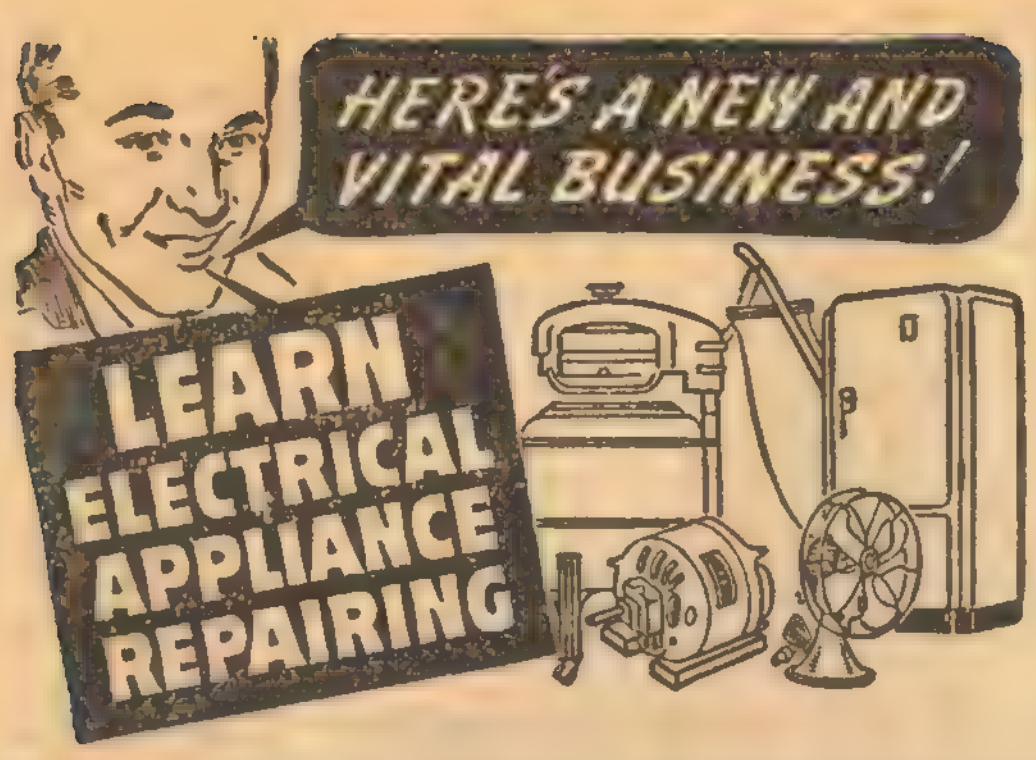
"California."

"You're off the trail. This stage only goes to Julesburg and that's the jumping off place. Nothin' much beyond that but the Pony Express. The real trail's further north."

I felt a sudden excitement. By a queer trick of fate, chance had sent me directly to the Pony Express!

"Alamo," I said. "Could I get a job with the Pony Express instead of going to California? I can ride—I was a blue ribbon steeplechase rider back East!"

"Too big," Alamo said. "You're about six



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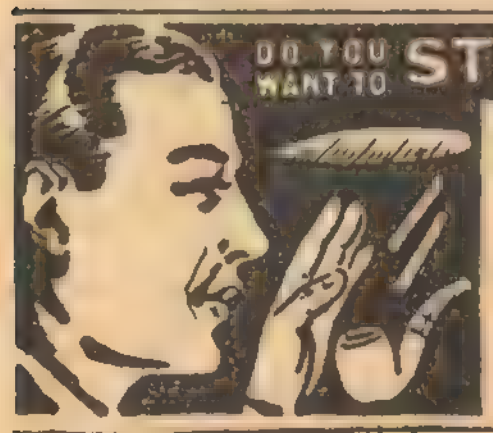

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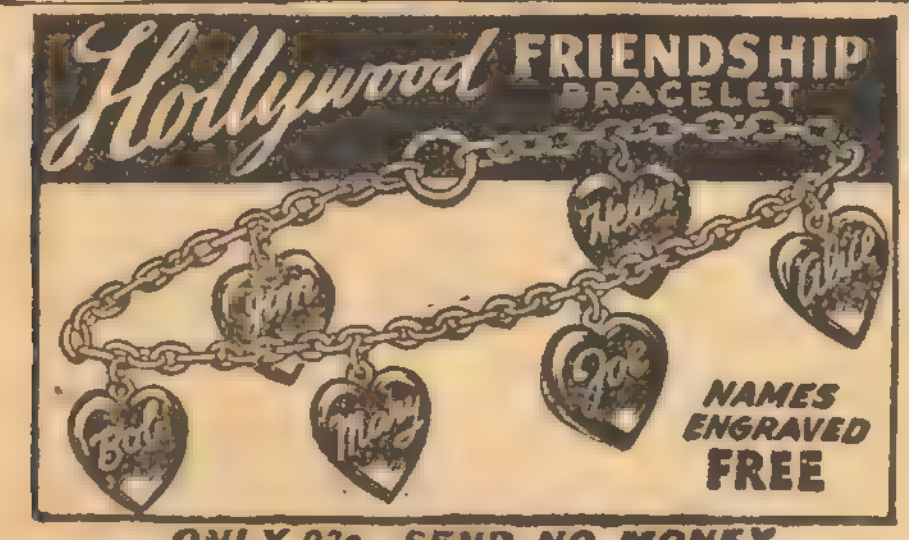

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foot, and weigh at least one hundred and eighty."

"Hundred and eighty-three."

"No. They got to have jockeys—like me."

"Oh, yes, I remember now! You're one of the crack riders Dad's always talking about!"

"Dad?" His eyebrows went up.

"I told you my name was John Russell," I said.

"Not that Russell?"

I NODDED "Russell, Majors and Waddell. He's my father."

"Jumpin' boll weevil! Why didn't yuh say so before? That's why Sanders has been tryin' to kill you!"

"Why?"

"Don't you know that the Pony Express took the mail contract right out from the Great Bear's teeth? Ever since then they've been tryin' to bust the Pony Express—make it fail or quit. Shucks! Bern Sanders would kill you—or Saint Peter—in a minute if he thought it would make Russell, Majors and Waddell stop runnin' the Pony Express."

"What a devil!" I took a deep breath. "He'd break my father's heart, blackmail his partners—just for a mail contract?"

Alamo nodded grimly. "Lots of men are like that." He mused a moment. "Sanders would follow you clear to California. What are you goin' there for, anyway?"

"Well—Dad and I had an argument. I want to show him I can make my own way. You understand?"

"I reckon." Alamo grinned. "Independent as a hog on ice. Which is my trouble too." Abruptly he shoved out a hard hand. "Shake. We're goin' to be partners for awhile."

"What do you mean?"

"We'll get you on the Pony Express payroll. You're too big for a rider but you can tend station—maybe on my run. It's the safest place for you, now. Sanders won't expect you to find that kind of a job and your dad would look everywhere in the world except in his own outfit. You'll be as safe as a pine needle in a forest."

We shook hands and laughed, thinking it was a fine bit of stategy. Which, in truth, it was. We were sure Bern Sanders wouldn't find out.

At Julesburg, Alamo talked to Slade, the section superintendent, who fortunately did not know me, and presently I was engaged as station man at the Cedar Crossing station. The regular man, Walter Conroy, was away on leave. Cedar Crossing was the eastern end of Alamo's run, so we were assured of considerable time together. This pleased me, as I had quickly taken a strong liking for the wiry little rider.

Passage of a week found me well broken in to the routine at the Cedar Crossing station. My duty was to care for the stable of horses and prepare meals for Alamo Paige,

whose eastbound run terminated here, and Pat Guitry, whose westbound route ended at the station. My job was not easy. The horses required considerable attention—grooming, feeding and doctoring when necessary. Also, though the menus consisted mostly of bacon, beans and poatoes, there was plenty of cooking to do, for the riders were apt to come in at all hours of the night, dragging me from sound sleep to begin the dreary task of feeding them and tending to another horse.

In the month of September this was not yet too unpleasant, but I visioned it in January and February when the temperature dropped to forty below and the snow was piled up about the cabin by a slashing, freezing wind. The thought made chills run up and down my spine. Yet the idea of quitting never even occurred to me. Alamo Paige was my friend and I like to stick by my friends.

In spite of my duties there was one thing I found time for—shooting practise. I had brought plenty of ammunition from Julesburg and I pestered Alamo Paige to show me the secret of his wizardry with the big Colt.

"No secret," he said amiably. "Just common sense, steady hands and lots of practice. You'll have to burn up many a box of them caps, Johnny. The important thing in usin' a gun to save yore life, is to forget about target practise, about linin' up the sights and

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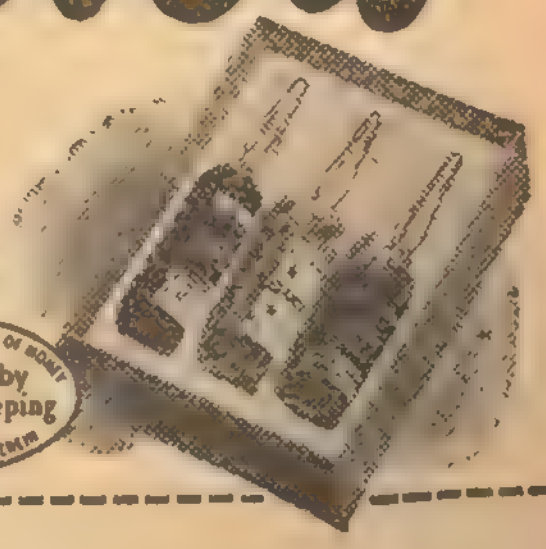

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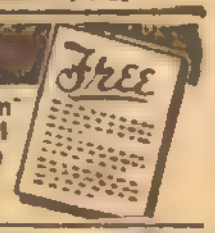

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"How near?" I asked.

He grinned. "Well, was I a tenderfoot, havin' to fight a duel with a bad gunman who could beat me seventy ways to the ace, I'd make it plenty close. I'd have us each hold the end of a handkerchief with our left hands, draw and fire with the right."

That made me gulp.

"That would be sure death for both!" I blurted.

"Right," he said grimly. "But it would make him think twice, for you'd get him too—you couldn't help it. Any other way he'd just get you—you wouldn't have a chance."

"I'll remember it in case I meet Bern Sanders again," I muttered.

I had been shooting at a tin can outside the cabin under Alamo's tutelage and, as we talked, I was reloading.

The Cedar Crossing station was set on high rolling prairie. Half a mile to the west, the first wooded foothills of the Rockies began, and down from the heights boiled the mountain creek that gave the station its name. It was a lovely wild spot, doubly appealing to me after so many years in the East.

"Almost like a real frontiersman," I said, swinging my Colt by the trigger guard.

It slipped from my hand and thudded on the ground a few feet away. Instantly there was a flash and roar, followed by the shrill howl of a bullet streaking into the sky.

I WAS so startled that I could only stare, but Alamo shook his head in mock sorrow.

"The late Johnny Russell was a nice feller," he said. "But he would load all six cylinders. He had the biggest funeral ever seen in Julesburg."

"I always keep forgetting," I muttered.

"Yep. And it's just pure luck that it didn't get one of us that time. There's five cylinders loaded now. Let 'er stay that way."

The month of September rolled by and the crisp golden days of October began without word or sign of Bern Sanders. Each day ushered in a greater glory of sky and sun and blazing foliage. The oaks were flame red, the maples burned yellow and orange and crimson so that the very hills seemed on fire. If a painter had put it on canvas you wouldn't have believed it.

About four o'clock one afternoon, Pat Guitry and I, lounging outside the cabin, heard the mellow notes of Alamo's horn floating down from the mountains to the west. That

meant he was not more than half a mile away and we both jumped into action.

By the time Alamo's horse burst out of Cedar Canyon and lined out for the last dash up to the cabin, Pat's horse was saddled and the rider was waiting at his head, keyed up and ready to go.

As Alamo dashed up and slid to a halt I had already seized the mochila—that blanket-like square of leather which fits snugly over the entire saddle and which carries on it the four cantinas in which the actual mail is padlocked.

Alamo stepped down from his still moving horse, the mochila was yanked up off the saddle horn and slapped down over Pat Guitry's saddle. His horse started at once and Pat let himself be yanked up and into his seat by the horse's momentum. With a wave of his hand, he was gone eastward in a rush of drumming hoofs.

Alamo and I looked at each other and grinned.

"The Russells are still holdin' up the pride of the family," he said.

"You're the one keeping the time schedule, not I. What do you want to eat?"

"Steak and mushrooms."

"You'll get bacon and potatoes—and—surprise! a grouse I knocked over this morning."

"Golly, better'n steak. Come on, I'll help you with the horse."

[*Turn page*]

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After attending to the horse, we came back to the cabin. Alamo hung up his gun belt on the wall peg and pulled off his boots while I put wood on the fire and began to slice bacon. Alamo found a copy of a month old newspaper and began brooding over it.

"South Carolina's threatenin' to secede and Governor Brown of Georgia says the South will never submit to the rule of Mr. Lincoln. You know, Johnny, I'm from Texas myself, but we can't break up the Union like this. It would mean two nations here instead of one."

"They're bluffing," I said.

"No, Johnny. Them Southerners don't bluff. They mean business."

"Well, Lincoln won't let them secede. It's unconstitutional. He couldn't let them if he wanted to."

"Meaning?"

"War," I said.

And astonishingly, my words were echoed by a voice from the doorway.

"War it is. Stand fast, gentlemen, and don't make a move."

Both our heads turned. Bern Sanders was standing in the doorway and the mouth of his pistol gaped large as it bore steadily upon us.

No one moved. The sputter and crackle of bacon sizzling in the pan was loud in the stillness.

I felt stupid at having been trapped like this; my mind was numb with shock. I remember thinking fleetingly, "What is he going to do?" and then dismissing the question as absurd. I knew what he had tried to do twice before—he was here to finish the job. I stole a look at Alamo's face. The jockey sized rider was still, relaxed, as though greeting a casual friend and under no strain whatever. But his eyes were as alert as a wild animal's and I knew that his fighting brain was considering every chance, every possibility of a break.

Bern Sanders knew it too.

"Move a finger, Paige, and you'll never move it again," he warned, stepping into the room, warily, and edging toward the gun belts hanging on the wall.

I wondered why he did not shoot at once and be done with it. Then I realized that he must have some plan in mind. Wanton shooting down of two Pony Express men would cause trouble, might even conceivably lead back to him if one of us had ever done any talking. We hadn't, of course—even Pat Guitry didn't know who I was—but Sanders couldn't know that. To avoid any suspicion he would have to make the murders foolproof—perhaps make them look like an Indian raid. There were bands of Piutes in the neighborhood and it would be the easiest thing in the world to imitate their work.

Something of this sort must have been his intention, for he was taking his time, evidently planning on disarming us and not shooting

at once. He was edging carefully around the table when the bacon fat in the pan popped and spattered all over my wrist.

SUDDEN pain made me cry out and jerk my wrist away. It startled Sanders too and for a second his gun and eyes wavered between Alamo and myself. I caught up the pan of hot fat and flung it at him.

If he had fired then he could scarcely have missed me. But his instinctive reaction was to protect himself from the scalding fat. He ducked wildly, yet some of the hot liquid splashed on him and he cursed luridly.

As he straightened up again I threw a chair under his feet. He stumbled over it and nearly fell. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Alamo Paige streaking for the guns on the wall.

Sanders got his gun up at last and I dived under the table. The Colt roared deafeningly in that narrow space. I felt the table jar as the heavy slug smashed into it. Then Sanders wheeled and dashed out of the cabin.

Right on his heels, Alamo Paige followed, his six-gun clutched in his fingers. Two shots blasted outside.

I climbed out from under the table, rushed to the wall, snatched the other six-gun and pelted out the door after him. When I burst into the sunshine, neither man was in sight.

"Get down!" roared Alamo's voice.

I was used to obeying him. I dived headlong for a boulder. Simultaneously a gun roared somewhere. The slug sent splinters of rock flying but I landed safely.

Hugging my rock shelter I peered around. Alamo waved cautiously from a little sandy gully where he was lying flat. He pointed with his gun muzzle to a tree some twenty yards away. Looking in that direction, I thought I could see part of Bern Sanders' body behind it.

I leveled my gun on top of the boulder and thumbed the hammer. It worked sluggishly and wouldn't fire. A glance showed why. In my wild dive for safety I had failed to protect the gun. The firing mechanism was filled with sand.

A laugh came from Sanders' tree. He had seen me try to shoot and had guessed the reason. Thereafter he discounted me in the fight.

Time stretched out and out to the breaking point. I was cramped and uncomfortable and furious with myself. In wriggling around I must have exposed my foot, for Sanders' gun blasted instantly and a fine shower of sand blew over my leg. Immediately Alamo's gun roared twice.

His bullets must have come close for suddenly Sanders darted from his tree and dived for the shelter of a big stump not ten yards away. Alamo's gun blasted twice more.

[*Turn page*]

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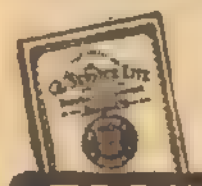

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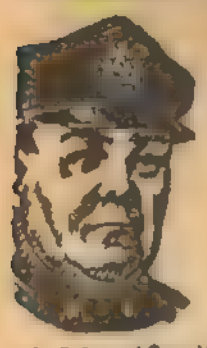

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"Got him, I think," he called to me.

Then an amazing thing happened. Bern Sanders stood up from behind his tree trunk. His pistol was held loosely in his right hand. Down his left sleeve blood was running. But there was a smile on his dark, handsome face. He stepped out from behind the stump and began to pace slowly, steadily toward us.

"Just a nick, Alamo," he said. "Just a little scratch. And worth it. Because that was your fifth bullet, my buck—your fifth and last. And I have one left."

A cold chill went over me at the words. Imagine the cold daring of the man, through all this to have calmly counted Alamo's shots, to know that the rider had expended his five bullets and now had only an empty gun in his hand. He had moved in at once, making sure Alamo had no time to reload! The man was indeed a devil!

"One more in my gun for you, Alamo," he said. "And when I've settled scores with you for Frenchy—and a few other things—my knife will do very nicely for your friend here."

I threw a look of anguish at Alamo. He was getting to his feet.

"No, wait!" I cried.

In a moment he would be shot down. My heart seemed to stop beating.

Neither man had heard me cry out. Bern Sanders continued pacing slowly forward, the blood horribly bright and wet and red on his sleeve. Alamo faced him, his own gun easy in his hand.

"You're wrong, Sanders," he said. "I've got another shot here."

"I counted five," Sanders said confidently.

"Then shoot," Alamo said, "because I'm going to."

The smile stayed on Sanders' face, but as he saw Alamo's gun swinging up a sudden look of alarm flashed into his eyes. Then his gun muzzle whipped up.

Both guns roared almost as one. Alamo never moved. But a stricken, shocked surprise spread over Sanders' face.

"You—you—" he choked and could get out no more.

His knees gave and threw him and he pitched forward, face down on the warm sod.

I stared at Alamo Paige. Reaction had made my own knees weak. I wanted to sit down.

"B-but, he's right," I said weakly. "There were five shots—one when you ran out, two you shot at him behind the tree and two when he ran—when you nicked him."

"That's correct," Alamo said softly. "And if it were my gun, Johnny, we'd both be dead ducks. But this is your gun, Johnny. I grabbed it off the wall by mistake. And I'm afraid, Johnny, that you went and loaded all six cylinders again!"

Should I have hung my head? I knew by the chuckle in his voice that he was far from reproaching me. My bad habit had brought unexpected results. One thing was now sure —Bern Sanders' attempt to discourage Russell, Majors and Waddell by the murder of one John Russell was finished. The Pony Express would continue. There would be trails for me yet to ride with my friend, Alamo Paige.

NEXT ISSUE'S ALAMO PAIGE STORY

STAGE LINE TO HELL

By REEVE WALKER

THE COWBOY HAD A WORD FOR IT

(Concluded from page 66)

ened his grip on these, the animal's wind was shut off, and he was readily brought under control.

The "bosal" was held in place on the horse's nostrils by a wrapping of cord that went down under the animal's muzzle. This was originally called a "fiadore," but it did not take the average cowboy long to change this to a "theodore" or more familiarly a "teddy."

"I reckon that about covers the rig that a cowboy had a habit of slinging onto his animal when the occasion required," the old-timer concluded. "But there's a heap of names that go for the words describing a horse himself. The best way to get yourself next to those names, so's you'll know which end of a bronc is which, is to draw yourself a chart, and mark it off. I ain't much of a hand at drawing pictures, but one of them there picture-painting fellows could take and paint a horse, and I'd be glad to mark it up for you."

The "Arbuckle" grinned. He supplied the picture of the horse printed on page 65, and the old-timer sure did mark it up. So if you're curious about the difference between a "poll" and a "pastern," or a "knee" and a "gaskin," then just run your eye over the cow-pony we've got right here. And don't tell folks that "waddies" didn't carry real "cannons" on their horses.

By now, folks, I guess we've brought our "greenhorn" right up to date on his mount, his saddle, bridle and other rigging. Next issue we'll have a look at his "shooting irons." Be seeing you then.

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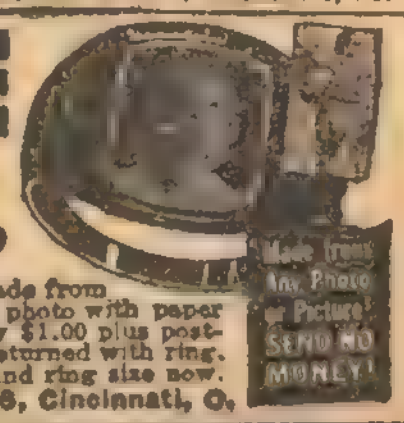

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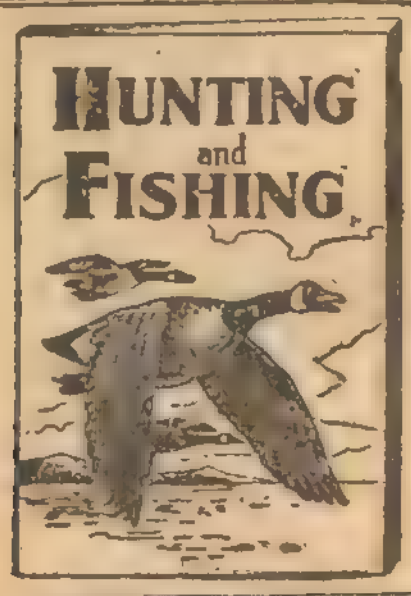

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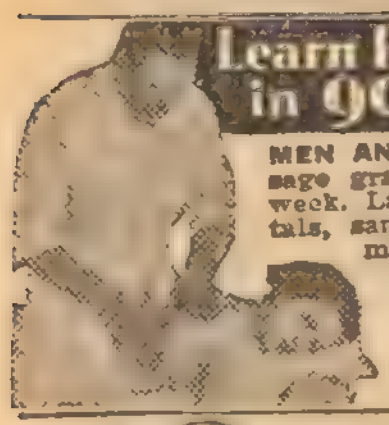

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TRAIL BLAZERS

(Continued from page 8)

ahead under terms of the lease or sale. The homestead is your special chunk of the glamorous West.

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As to the length of the leases given the regulations state, they will not be issued for a period of more than five years, "unless the character of the venture justifies a longer period."

When leases come up for renewal, lessees are accorded preference rights. Lessees are also accorded preference rights to purchase the land after the expiration of the lease if the Government authorizes such sale.

One to a Customer

Something else we might bring up in connection with these Jackrabbit homesteads is that they are strictly one to a customer. After all the tracts are not farms, or productive areas. They are purely home and cabin sites. Five acres of sunshine in the West's great outdoors ought to do most anybody for vacation purposes.

In filling out the Land Office application forms for land coming under the provisions of the Five Acre Tract Act persons must give their full names, address, a description of the tract desired by general location and by section, range and township. In addition facts regarding citizenship must be supplied.

If not a native born citizen, the applicant must be able to give the date of his naturalization or declaration, title and location of the court in which the proceedings were heard, and the number, if any,.of the document.

The applicant's age must also be given and the use for which he proposes to use the land must be definitely stated. A description of any intended improvements and an estimate of their cost should be included in the application.

Space for the answers to these questions and several others relative to the land itself is provided for on the application blanks. Full regulations governing the taking up of Jackrabbit homesteads under the Five Acre Tract Law can be obtained from any local district U. S. Land Office, or from the U. S. Land Office in Washington, D. C.

Pioneer Country

Portions of the public domain outside the desert country of Southern California and the Southwest are also available for location and leasing under the Jackrabbit homestead regulations.

They are parts of the real West, primitive, pioneer country. They make grand home sites for an outdoor enthusiast with some outside means of providing his own livelihood.

They make just as fine camping and vacation sites for the person who plans to visit them only occasionally when he can get away by himself, or with his family, from the grind of a city job.

But—and here's where candor compels us to issue a word of warning. Don't dream of tackling a Jackrabbit homestead sight unseen. It can't be done. Curb your impatience. Wait 'til you can get out and examine the area yourself. Take your time about picking out your land. Check by personal investigation such important things as water supply, roads, accessibility and other vital factors.

Then, and not 'till then, when you have satisfied yourself regarding the physical condition of the tract in question fork up the fin for five acres. Fill out the necessary papers and file your formal application. You're on your way to possessing a Jackrabbit homestead deep in the West.

See you folks again next issue, friends. *Hasta la vista.*

—Captain Ranger

IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

JIM Keaton, secretary of the Cattlemens' Association, left Tombstone Jones and Speedy Smith in charge of the C. A. office because his wife was sick. Which was a mistake on his part. Tombstone and Speedy have a way of getting into trouble when left alone!

That was why they jumped at the chance of doing a job of investigating for James Packard from New York, when he came into the office that day.

"I was told I could find a first-rate investigator here," said Mr. Packard. "I secured the services of a New York detective and sent him out here, and do you know what happened to him?"

"Sure," Tombstone nodded. "Somebody killed him."

He was bluffing as usual—he didn't know anything about the detective, but it wasn't Tombstone's way to admit a thing like that. He was reputed the best single-handed liar in

[*Turn page*]

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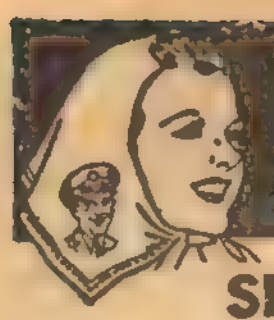

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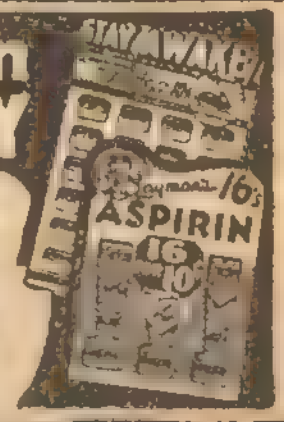

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the country, and he guarded that reputation jealously.

However, Tombstone and Speedy did learn that James Packard had a son named Bertie who decided he wanted to be a rancher and raise cattle, and had come West to do so. Bertie had wired his father for thirty thousand dollars, so Brown had engaged the services of the detective to take the money to his son.

"Weeks passed," Packard said, "And I finally got a letter from the detective. He said Bertie had bought a half interest in a rather defunct cattle ranch for fifteen thousand dollars, was supporting the biggest saloon in town, and had fallen in love with a notorious honkatonk dancer named La Flama."

"Bertie," said Speedy soberly, "is leading an interestin' life."

Just how interesting Tombstone did not learn until they went to investigate in TROUBLE TRAILERS IN TOMAHAWK, the hilarious and exciting novelet by W. C. Tuttle in the next issue of EXCITING WESTERN. They learned what happened to Bertie and the detective and discovered a lot more before they were through. A grand yarn, bringing you Tombstone and Speedy at their funniest and best—and that's saying plenty!

And in the next issue—VANISHING TRAILS, a swift moving novelet of the Wyoming-Montana winter rangeland by R. S. Lerch, in this humdinger of a yarn, U. S. Marshal "Crack" Forsythe gets the man he is after—and is forced to take part in the six-gun finish of the feud between the Beltmans and the Whartons. There are plenty of thrills from start to finish, and a whale of a surprise at the end!

Navajo Raine rides again in NAVAJO TURNS FIREBUG, an exciting Arizona Ranger yarn of danger trails by Jackson Cole. And there will also be a rip-snorting selection of shorter Western stories in the next

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

WE ARE always interested in the opinions of our readers, for we are eager to give you exactly the type of fiction that you like best—and your letters help us in planning future issues. Of course tastes differ—and for that reason it is sometimes difficult to please everybody, try as we might. However, we do think we strike a pretty high average. If you have any comments or suggestions, please drop us a letter or postcard. Tell us about the stories you liked best and about those that didn't appeal to you. We'll be very glad to hear from you.

Please address all your letters and postcards to The Editor, EXCITING WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

And now let's take a look at some of the letters we have been receiving:

Well, I just couldn't keep from writing any longer. Some of those who write in make me so mad. They always have to say they don't like this—they don't like that—still they keep reading the book. As for me I like every blame story you print. I think they are all swell. Navajo Raine, Alamo Paige and Speedy and Tombstone are wonderful. The Speedy and Tombstone stories are full of fun, wisecracks and plenty of excitement when they get started.

I want you to know you have one reader that will always like every story you put in your book, and I'm sure there are a lot of other readers who feel the same way I do. So keep up the good work, I'll always read EXCITING WESTERN as long as you print it.—*Mrs. Ray Allanson, Caruthersville, Mo.*

Thanks very much for your letter, Mrs. Allanson. You certainly are a real EXCITING WESTERN fan. Still, we like our readers to criticize when they feel so inclined, too. For instance:

I have been a reader of EXCITING WESTERN for some time and I like Alamo Paige best of all the characters who appear in the magazine. Tombstone and Speedy are funny at times, but often they talk too much to suit me. All the same, EXCITING WESTERN is a swell book.—*Henry Norton, Denver, Colo.*

That was telling us just what you like and don't like, Henry! We hope you find our current Tombstone and Speedy novelets more to your taste. And thanks for your letter. Here's another opinion:

Your magazine is great. The last Tombstone and Speedy yarn I read still has me chuckling. I can't get much kick out of the Alamo Paige yarns, but Navajo Raine is all right!—*James Lang, Chicago, Ill.*

Looks like that's about all the letters we can quote from this time, but they are representative of hundreds of other swell missives, for every one of which we're grateful. We'll print excerpts from many more of your letters in coming issues. So long for now—see you all next issue!

—THE EDITOR.

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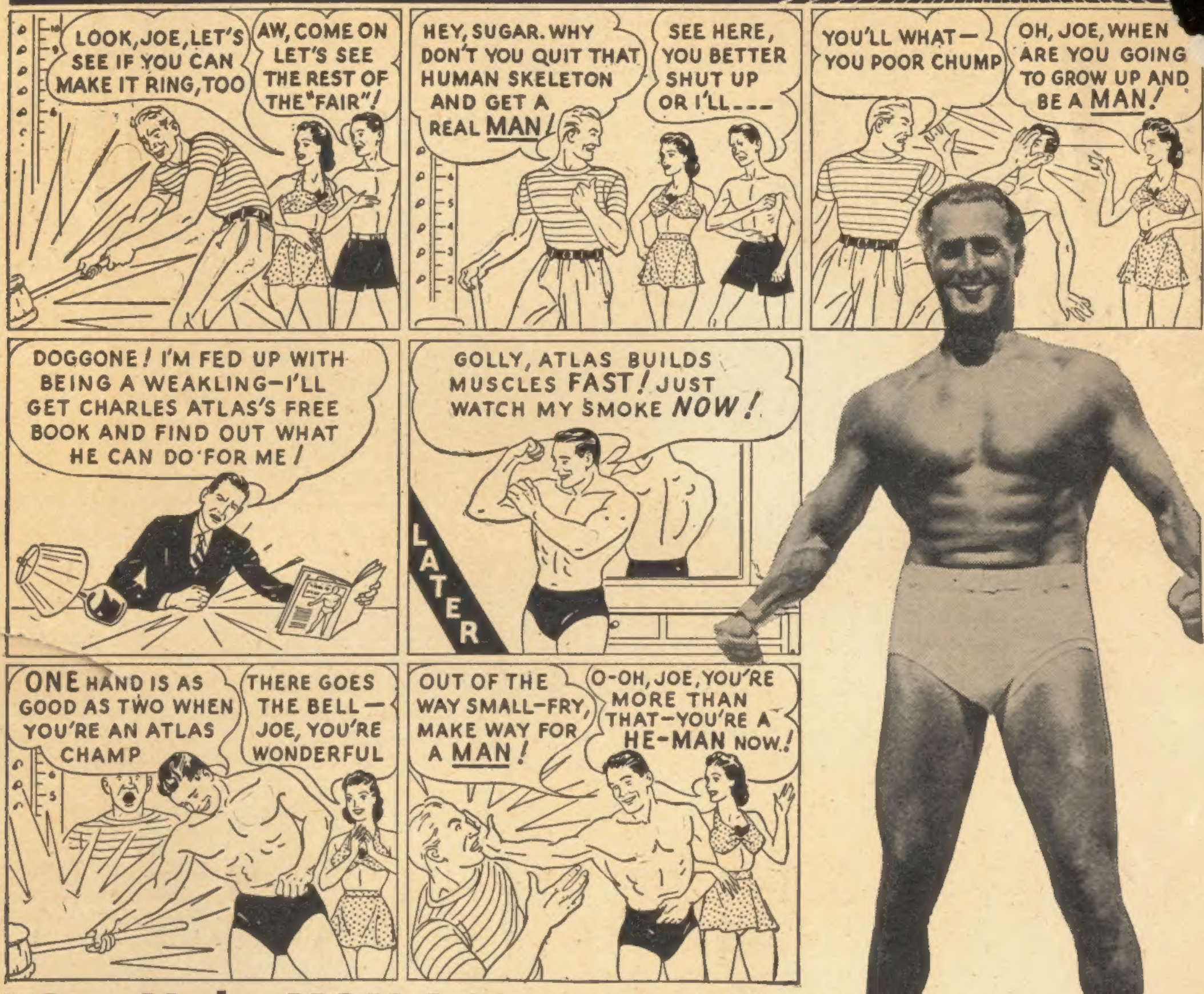
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